

*Isabella;*  
or,  
*The Pot of Basil*

A STORY FROM BOCCACCIO

1

Fair Isabel, poor simple Isabell  
Lorenzo, a young palmer in Love's eye  
They could not in the self-same mansion dwell  
Without some stir of heart, some malady;  
5 They could not sit at meals but feel how well  
It soothed each to be the other by;  
They could not, sure, beneath the same roof sleep  
But to each other dream, and nightly weep.

2

With every morn their love grew tenderer,  
10 With every eve deeper and tenderer still;  
He might not in house, field, or garden stir,  
But her full shape would all his seeing fill;  
And his continual voice was pleasanter  
15 To her, than noise of trees or hidden rill;  
Her lute-string gave an echo of his name,  
She spoilt her half-done broidery with the same.

3

He knew whose gentle hand was at the latch,  
Before the door had given her to his eyes;  
And from her chamber-window he would catch  
20 Her beauty farther than the falcon spies;  
And constant as her vespers would he watch,  
Because her face was turn'd to the same skies;  
And with sick longing all the night outwear,  
To hear her morning-step upon the stair.

4

A whole long month of May in this sad plight  
25 Made their cheeks paler by the break of June:  
"To-morrow will I bow to my delight,  
To-morrow will I ask my lady's boon."—

30

"O may I never see another night,  
Lorenzo, if thy lips breathe not love's tune."—  
So spake they to their pillows; but, alas,  
Honeyless days and days did he let pass;

5

Until sweet Isabella's untouch'd cheek  
Fell sick within the rose's just domain,  
35 Fell thin as a young mother's, who doth seek  
By every lull to cool her infant's pain:  
"How ill she is," said he, "I may not speak,  
And yet I will, and tell my love all plain:  
If looks speak love-laws, I will drink her tears,  
40 And at the least 'twill startle off her cares."

6

So said he one fair morning, and all day  
His heart beat awfully against his side;  
And to his heart he inwardly did pray  
For power to speak; but still the ruddy tide  
45 Stilled his voice, and puls'd resolve away—  
Fever'd his high conceit of such a bride,  
Yet brought him to the meekness of a child:  
Alas! when passion is both meek and wild!

7

So once more he had wak'd and anguished  
50 A dreary night of love and misery,  
If Isabel's quick eye had not been wed  
To every symbol on his forehead high;  
She saw it waxing very pale and dead,  
And straight all flush'd; so, lisped tenderly,  
55 "Lorenzo!"—here she ceas'd her timid quest,  
But in her tone and look he read the rest.

8

"O Isabella, I can half perceive  
That I may speak my grief into thine ear;  
If thou didst ever any thing believe,  
60 Believe how I love thee, believe how near  
My soul is to its doom: I would not grieve

Thy hand by unwelcome pressing, would not fear  
Thine eyes by gazing; but I cannot live  
Another night, and not my passion shrive.

## 9

65 "Love! thou art leading me from wintry cold,  
Lady! thou leadest me to summer clime,  
And I must taste the blossoms that unfold  
In its ripe warmth this gracious morning time."  
So said, his erewhile timid lips grew bold,  
70 And poesied with hers in dewy rhyme:  
Great bliss was with them, and great happiness  
Grew, like a lusty flower in June's caress.

## 10

Parting they seem'd to tread upon the air,  
Twin roses by the zephyr blown apart  
75 Only to meet again more close, and share  
The inward fragrance of each other's heart.  
She, to her chamber gone, a ditty fair  
Sang, of delicious love and honey'd dart;  
He with light steps went up a western hill,  
80 And bade the sun farewell, and joy'd his fill.

## 11

All close they met again, before the dusk  
Had taken from the stars its pleasant veil,  
All close they met, all eves, before the dusk  
Had taken from the stars its pleasant veil,  
85 Close in a bower of hyacinth and musk,  
Unknown of any, free from whispering tale.  
Ah! better had it been for ever so,  
Than idle ears should pleasure in their woe.

## 12

Were they unhappy then?—It cannot be—  
90 Too many tears for lovers have been shed,  
Too many sighs give we to them in fee,  
Too much of pity after they are dead,  
Too many doleful stories do we see,  
Whose matter in bright gold were best be read;

95 Except in such a page where 'Theseus' spouse  
Over the pathless waves towards him bows.

## 13

But, for the general award of love,  
The little sweet doth kill much bitterness;  
Though Dido silent is in under-grove,  
100 And Isabella's was a great distress,  
Though young Lorenzo in warm Indian clove  
Was not embalm'd, this truth is not the less—  
Even bees, the little ahsmen of spring-bowers,  
Know there is richest juice in poison-flowers.

## 14

105 With her two brothers this fair lady dwelt,  
Enriched from ancestral merchandize,  
And for them many a weary hand did swelt  
In torched mines and noisy factories,  
And many once proud-quiver'd loins did melt  
110 In blood from stinging whip;—with hollow eyes  
Many all day in dazzling river stood,  
To take the rich-ored driftings of the flood.

## 15

For them the Ceylon diver held his breath,  
And went all naked to the hungry shark;  
115 For them his ears gush'd blood; for them in death  
The seal on the cold ice with piteous bark  
Lay full of darts; for them alone did seethe  
A thousand men in troubles wide and dark:  
Half-ignorant, they turn'd an easy wheel,  
120 That set sharp racks at work, to pinch and peel.

## 16

Why were they proud? Because their marble founts  
Gush'd with more pride than do a wretch's tears?—  
Why were they proud? Because fair orange-mounts  
Were of more soft ascent than lazar stairs?—  
125 Why were they proud? Because red-lin'd ascents  
Were richer than the songs of Grecian years?—  
Why were they proud? again we ask aloud,  
Why in the name of Glory were they proud?

## 17

Yet were these Florentines as self-retired  
 130 In hungry pride and gainful cowardice,  
 As two close Hebrews in that land inspired,  
 Paled in and vineyarded from beggar-spies;  
 The hawks of ship-mast forests—the untired  
 And pannier'd mules for ducats and old lies—  
 135 Quick cat's-paws on the generous stray-away,—  
 Great wits in Spanish, Tuscan, and Malay.

## 18

How was it these same ledger-men could spy  
 Fair Isabella in her downy nest?  
 How could they find out in Lorenzo's eye  
 140 A straying from his toil? Hot Egypt's pest  
 Into their vision covetous and sly!  
 How could these money-bags see east and west?—  
 Yet so they did—and every dealer fair  
 Must see behind, as doth the hunted hare.

## 19

O eloquent and famed Boccaccio!  
 Of thee we now should ask forgiving boon,  
 And of thy spicy myrtles as they blow,  
 And of thy roses amorous of the moon,  
 And of thy lilies, that do paler grow  
 150 Now they can no more hear thy ghittern's tune,  
 For venturing syllables that ill beseem  
 The quiet glooms of such a piteous theme.

## 20

Grant thou a pardon here, and then the tale  
 Shall move on soberly, as it is meet;  
 155 There is no other crime, no mad assail  
 To make old prose in modern rhyme more sweet:  
 But it is done—succeed the verse or fail—  
 To honour thee, and thy gone spirit greet;  
 To stead thee as a verse in English tongue,  
 160 An echo of thee in the north-wind sung.

## 21

These brethren having found by many signs  
 What love Lorenzo for their sister had,

And how she lov'd him too, each unconfines  
 His bitter thoughts to other, well nigh mad  
 165 That he, the servant of their trade designs,  
 Should in their sister's love be blithe and glad,  
 When 'twas their plan to coax her by degrees  
 To some high noble and his olive-trees.

## 22

And many a jealous conference had they,  
 170 And many times they bit their lips alone,  
 Before they fix'd upon a surest way  
 To make the youngster for his crime atone;  
 And at the last, these men of cruel clay  
 Cut Mercy with a sharp knife to the bone;  
 175 For they resolved in some forest dim  
 To kill Lorenzo, and there bury him.

## 23

So on a pleasant morning, as he leant  
 Into the sun-rise, o'er the balustrade  
 Of the garden-terrace, towards him they bent  
 180 Their footing through the dews; and to him said,  
 "You seem there in the quiet of content,  
 Lorenzo, and we are most loth to invade  
 Calm speculation; but if you are wise,  
 Bestride your steed while cold is in the skies.

## 24

"To-day we purpose, ay, this hour we mount  
 185 To spur three leagues towards the Apennine;  
 Come down, we pray thee, ere the hot sun count  
 His dewy rosary on the eglantine."  
 Lorenzo, courteously as he was wont,  
 190 Bow'd a fair greeting to these serpents' whine;  
 And went in haste, to get in readiness,  
 With belt, and spur, and bracing huntsman's dress.

## 25

And as he to the court-yard pass'd along,  
 Each third step did he pause, and listen'd oft  
 195 If he could hear his lady's matin-song,  
 Or the light whisper of her footstep soft;

And as he thus over his passion hung,  
 He heard a laugh full musical aloft;  
 When, looking up, he saw her features bright  
 200 Smile through an in-door lattice, all delight.

## 26

"Love, Isabell" said he, "I was in pain  
 Lest I should miss to bid thee a good morrow:  
 Ah! what if I should lose thee, when so fain  
 I am to stifle all the heavy sorrow  
 205 Of a poor three hours' absence? but we'll gain  
 Out of the amorous dark what day doth borrow.  
 Good bye! I'll soon be back."—"Good bye!" said she:—  
 And as he went she chanted merrily.

## 27

So the two brothers and their murder'd man  
 210 Rode past fair Florence, to where Arno's stream  
 Gurgles through straiten'd banks, and still doth fau  
 Itself with dancing bulrush, and the bream  
 Keeps head against the freshets. Sick and wan  
 The brothers' faces in the ford did seem,  
 215 Lorenzo's flush with love.—They pass'd the water  
 Into a forest quiet for the slaughter.

## 28

There was Lorenzo slain and buried in,  
 There in that forest did his great love cease;  
 Ah! when a soul doth thus its freedom win,  
 220 It aches in loneliness—is ill at peace  
 As the break-covert blood-hounds of such sin:  
 They dipp'd their swords in the water, and did tease  
 Their horses homeward, with convulsed spur,  
 Each richer by his being a murderer.

## 29

They told their sister how, with sudden speed,  
 225 Lorenzo had ta'en ship for foreign lands,  
 Because of some great urgency and need  
 In their affairs, requiring trusty hands.  
 Poor Girl! put on thy stifling widow's weed,  
 230 And 'scape at once from Hope's accursed bands;

To-day thou wilt not see him, nor to-morrow,  
 And the next day will be a day of sorrow.

## 30

She weeps alone for pleasures not to be;  
 Sorely she wept until the night came on,  
 235 And then, instead of love, O misery!  
 She brooded o'er the luxury alone:  
 His image in the dusk she seem'd to see,  
 And to the silence made a gentle moan,  
 Spreading her perfect arms upon the air,  
 240 And on her couch low murmuring "Where? O where?"

## 31

But Selfishness, Love's cousin, held not long  
 Its fiery vigil in her single breast;  
 She fretted for the golden hour, and hung  
 Upon the time with feverish unrest—  
 245 Not long—for soon into her heart a throng  
 Of higher occupants, a richer zest,  
 Came tragic; passion not to be subdued,  
 And sorrow for her love in travels rude.

## 32

In the mid days of autumn, on their eyes  
 250 The breath of Winter comes from far away,  
 And the sick west continually bereaves  
 Of some gold tinge, and plays a roundelay  
 Of death among the bushes and the leaves,  
 To make all bare before he dares to stray  
 255 From his north cavern. So sweet Isabel  
 By gradual decay from beauty fell,

## 33

Because Lorenzo came not. Oftentimes  
 She ask'd her brothers, with an eye all pale,  
 Striving to be itself, what dungeon climes  
 260 Could keep him off so long? They spake a tale  
 Time after time, to quiet her. Their crimes  
 Came on them, like a smoke from Hinnom's vale;  
 And every night in dreams they groan'd aloud  
 To see their sister in her snowy shroud.

## 34

265 And she had died in drowsy ignorance,  
 But for a thing more deadly dark than all;  
 It came like a fierce potion, drunk by chance,  
 Which saves a sick man from the feather'd pall  
 For some few gasping moments; like a lance,  
 270 Waking an Indian from his cloudy hall  
 With cruel pierce, and bringing him again  
 Sense of the gnawing fire at heart and brain.

## 35

It was a vision.—In the drowsy gloom,  
 The dull of midnight, at her couch's foot  
 275 Lorenzo stood, and wept: the forest tomb  
 Had marr'd his glossy hair which once could shoot  
 Lustre into the sun, and put cold doom  
 Upon his lips, and taken the soft lute  
 From his lorn voice, and past his loamed ears  
 280 Had made a miry channel for his tears.

## 36

Strange sound it was, when the pale shadow spake;  
 For there was striving, in its piteous tongue,  
 To speak as when on earth it was awake,  
 And Isabella on its music hung:  
 285 Languor there was in it, and tremulous shake,  
 As in a palsied Druid's harp unstrung;  
 And through it moan'd a ghostly under-song,  
 Like hoarse night-gusts sepulchral briars among.

## 37

Its eyes, though wild, were still all dewy bright  
 290 With love, and kept all phantom fear aloof  
 From the poor girl by magic of their light,  
 The while it did unthread the horrid woof  
 Of the late darken'd time,—the murderous spite  
 Of pride and avarice,—the dark pine roof  
 295 In the forest,—and the sodden turfed dell,  
 Where, without any word, from stabs he fell.

## 38

\* Saying moreover, "Isabel, my sweet!  
 Red whortle-berries droop above my head,

300 And a large flint-stone weighs upon my feet;  
 Around me beeches and high chestnuts shed  
 Their leaves and prickly nuts; a sheep-fold bleat  
 Comes from beyond the river to my bed:  
 Go, shed one tear upon my heather-bloom,  
 And it shall comfort me within the tomb.

## 39

305 "I am a shadow now, alas! alas!  
 Upon the skirts of human-nature dwelling  
 Alone: I chant alone the holy mass,  
 While little sounds of life are round me knelling,  
 And glossy bees at noon do fieldward pass,  
 310 And many a chapel bell the hour is telling,  
 Paining me through: those sounds grow strange to me,  
 And thou art distant in Humanity.

## 40

"I know what was, I feel full well what is,  
 And I should rage, if spirits could go mad;  
 315 Though I forget the taste of earthly bliss,  
 That paleness warms my grave, as though I had  
 A Seraph chosen from the bright abyss  
 To be my spouse: thy paleness makes me glad;  
 Thy beauty grows upon me, and I feel  
 320 A greater love through all my essence steal."

## 41

The Spirit mourn'd "Adieu!"—dissolv'd, and left  
 The atom darkness in a slow turmoil;  
 As when of healthful midnight sleep bereft,  
 Thinking on rugged hours and fruitless toil,  
 325 We put our eyes into a pillowy cleft,  
 And see the spangly gloom froth up and boil:  
 It made sad Isabella's eyelids ache,  
 And in the dawn she started up awake;

## 42

330 "Hal hal" said she, "I knew not this hard life,  
 I thought the worst was simple misery;  
 I thought some Fate with pleasure or with strife  
 Portion'd us—happy days, or else to die;  
 But there is crime—a brother's bloody knife!

Sweet Spirit, thou hast school'd my infancy:  
 335 I'll visit thee for this, and kiss thine eyes,  
 And greet thee morn and even in the skies."

## 43

When the full morning came, she had devised  
 How she might secret to the forest hic;  
 How she might find the clay, so dearly prized,  
 340 And sing to it one latest lullaby;  
 How her short absence might be unsurmised,  
 While she the inmost of the dream would try.  
 Resolv'd, she took with her an aged nurse,  
 And went into that dismal forest-hearse.

## 44

See, as they creep along the river side,  
 How she doth whisper to that aged Dame,  
 And, after looking round the champaign wide,  
 Shows her a knife.—"What feverous hectic flame  
 Burns in thee, child?—What good can thee beide,  
 350 That thou should'st smile again?"—The evening came,  
 And they had found Lorenzo's earthy bed;  
 The flint was there, the berries at his head.

## 45

Who hath not loiter'd in a green church-yard,  
 And let his spirit, like a demon-mole,  
 355 Work through the clayey soil and gravel hard,  
 To see scull, coffin'd bones, and funeral stole;  
 Pitying each form that hungry Death hath marr'd,  
 And filling it once more with human soul?  
 Ah! this is holiday to what was felt  
 360 When Isabella by Lorenzo knelt.

## 46

She gaz'd into the fresh-thrown mould, as though  
 One glance did fully all its secrets tell;  
 Clearly she saw, as other eyes would know  
 Pale limbs at bottom of a crystal well;  
 365 Upon the murderous spot she seem'd to grow,  
 Like to a native lily of the dell:  
 Then with her knife, all sudden, she began  
 To dig more fervently than misers can.

## 47

Soon she turn'd up a soiled glove, whereon  
 370 Her silk had play'd in purple phantasies,  
 She kiss'd it with a lip more chill than stone,  
 And put it in her bosom, where it dries  
 And freezes utterly unto the bone  
 Those dainties made to still an infant's cries:  
 375 Then 'gan she work again; nor stay'd her care,  
 But to throw back at times her veiling hair.

## 48

That old nurse stood beside her wondering,  
 Until her heart felt pity to the core  
 At sight of such a dismal labouring,  
 380 And so she kneeled, with her locks all hoar,  
 And put her lean hands to the horrid thing:  
 Three hours they labour'd at this travail sore;  
 At last they felt the kernel of the grave,  
 And Isabella did not stamp and rave.

## 49

Ah! wherefore all this wormy circumstance?  
 385 Why linger at the yawning tomb so long?  
 O for the gentleness of old Romance,  
 The simple plaining of a minstrel's song!  
 Fair reader, at the old tale take a glance,  
 390 For here, in truth, it doth not well belong  
 To speak:—O turn thee to the very tale,  
 And taste the music of that vision pale.

## 50

With duller steel than the Perséan sword  
 They cut away no formless monster's head,  
 395 But one, whose gentleness did well accord  
 With death, as life. The ancient harps have said,  
 Love never dies, but lives, immortal Lord:  
 If Love impersonate was ever dead,  
 Pale Isabella kiss'd it, and low moan'd.  
 400 'Twas love; cold,—dead indeed, but not dethroned.

## 51

In anxious secrecy they took it home,  
 And then the prize was all for Isabel:

She calm'd its wild hair with a golden comb,  
 And all around each eye's sepulchral cell  
 405 Pointed each fringed lash; the smeared loam  
 With tears, as chilly as a dripping well,  
 She drench'd away:—and still she comb'd, and kept  
 Sighing all day—and still she kiss'd, and wept.

## 52

Then in a silken scarf,—sweet with the dews  
 410 Of precious flowers pluck'd in Araby,  
 And divine liquids come with odorous ooze  
 Through the cold serpent-pipe refreshfully,—  
 She wrapp'd it up; and for its tomb did choose  
 A garden-pot, wherein she laid it by,  
 415 And cover'd it with mould, and o'er it set  
 Sweet basil, which her tears kept ever wet.

## 53

And she forgot the stars, the moon, and sun,  
 And she forgot the blue above the trees,  
 And she forgot the dells where waters run,  
 420 And she forgot the chilly autumn breeze;  
 She had no knowledge when the day was done,  
 And the new morn she saw not: but in peace  
 Hung over her sweet basil evermore,  
 And moisten'd it with tears unto the core.

## 54

And so she ever led it with thin tears,  
 425 Whence thick, and green, and beautiful it grew,  
 So that it smelt more balmy than its peers  
 Of basil-tufts in Florence; for it drew  
 Nurture besides, and life, from human fears,  
 430 From the fast mouldering head there shut from view:  
 So that the jewel, safely casketed,  
 Came forth, and in perfumed leaflets spread.

## 55

O Melancholy, linger here awhile!  
 O Music, Music, breathe despondingly!  
 435 O Echo, Echo, from some sombre isle,  
 Unknown, Lethean, sigh to us—O sigh!

Spirits in grief, lift up your heads, and smile;  
 Lift up your heads, sweet Spirits, heavily,  
 And make a pale light in your cypress glooms,  
 440 Tinting with silver wan your marble tombs.

## 56

Moan hither, all ye syllables of woe,  
 From the deep throat of sad Melpomenel  
 Through bronzed lyre in tragic order go,  
 And touch the strings into a mystery;  
 445 Sound mournfully upon the winds and low;  
 For simple Isabel is soon to be  
 Among the dead: She withers, like a palm  
 Cut by an Indian for its juicy balm.

## 57

O leave the palm to wither by itself;  
 450 Let not quick Winter chill its dying hour!—  
 It may not be—those Baalites of pelf,  
 Her brethren, noted the continual shower  
 From her dead eyes; and many a curious elf,  
 Among her kindred, wonder'd that such dower  
 455 Of youth and beauty should be thrown aside  
 By one mark'd out to be a noble's bride.

## 58

And, furthermore, her brethren wonder'd much  
 Why she sat drooping by the basil green,  
 And why it flourish'd, as by magic touch;  
 460 Greatly they wonder'd what the thing might mean:  
 They could not surely give belief, that such  
 A very nothing would have power to wean  
 Her from her own fair youth, and pleasures gay,  
 And even remembrance of her love's delay.

## 59

Therefore they watch'd a time when they might sift  
 465 This hidden whim; and long they watch'd in vain;  
 For seldom did she go to chapel-shrift,  
 And seldom felt she any hunger-pain;  
 And when she left, she hurried back, as swift  
 470 As bird on wing to breast its eggs again;

And, patient as a hen-bird, sat her there  
Beside her basil, weeping through her hair.

60

Yet they contriv'd to steal the basil-pot,  
And to examine it in secret place:  
475 The thing was vile with green and livid spot,  
And yet they knew it was Lorenzo's face:  
The guerdon of their murder they had got,  
And so left Florence in a moment's space,  
Never to turn again.—Away they went,  
480 With blood upon their heads, to banishment.

61

O Melancholy, turn thine eyes away!  
O Music, Music, breathe despondingly!  
O Echo, Echo, on some other day,  
From isles Lethæan, sigh to us—O sigh!  
485 Spirits of grief, sing not your "Well-a-way!"  
For Isabel, sweet Isabel, will die;  
Will die a death too lone and incomplete,  
Now they have ta'en away her basil sweet.

62

Piteous she look'd on dead and senseless things,  
490 Asking for her lost basil amorously;  
And with melodious chuckle in the strings  
Of her lorn voice, she oftentimes would cry  
After the pilgrim in his wanderings,  
To ask him where her basil was; and why  
495 'Twas hid from her: "For cruel 'tis," said she,  
"To steal my basil-pot away from me."

63

And so she pined, and so she died forlorn,  
Imploring for her basil to the last.  
No heart was there in Florence but did mourn  
500 In pity of her love, so overcast.  
And a sad ditty of this story born  
From mouth to mouth through all the country pass'd:  
Still is the burthen sung—"O cruelty,  
To steal my basil-pot away from me!"

*Mother of Hermes! and still youthful Maia*

Mother of Hermes! and still youthful Maia!  
May I sing to thee  
As thou wast hymned on the shores of Baiaë?  
Or may I woo thee  
5 In earlier Sicilian? or thy smiles  
Seek, as they once were sought, in Grecian isles,  
By bards who died content in pleasant sward,  
Leaving great verse unto a little clan?  
O give me their old vigour, and unheard,  
10 Save of the quiet primrose, and the span  
Of heaven, and few ears  
Rounded by thee, my song should die away,  
Content as theirs,  
Rich in the simple worship of a day.

*To Homer*

Standing aloof in giant ignorance,  
Of thee I hear and of the Cyclades,  
As one who sits ashore and longs perchance  
To visit dolphin-coral in deep seas.  
5 So wast thou blind;—but then the veil was rent,  
For Jove uncurtain'd heaven to let thee live,  
And Neptune made for thee a spunny tent,  
And Pan made sing for thee his forest-hive;  
Aye on the shores of darkness there is light,  
10 And precipices show untrdden green,  
There is a budding morrow in midnight,  
There is a triple sight in blindness keen;  
Such seeing hadst thou, as it once befel  
To Dian, Queen of Earth, and Heaven, and Hell.

*Give me your patience, sister, while I frame*

Give me your patience, sister, while I frame  
Exact in capitals your golden name:  
Or sue the fair Apollo and he will