

Giovanni Boccaccio. *The Decameron* (ca. 1353)

Translated by J.M. Rigg

Context

The Decameron is structured in a frame narrative, or frame tale.¹ Boccaccio begins with a description of the Black Death and a group of seven women and three men who flee from plague-ridden Florence to a villa in the countryside of Fiesole for two weeks. To pass the time, each member of the party tells one story for each one of the nights spent at the villa. Although fourteen days pass, two days each week are set aside; one day for chores and one holy day during which no work is done. In this manner, one hundred stories are told by the end of the two weeks.

Each of the ten characters is charged as King or Queen of the company for one of the ten days in turn. Each character tells a tale of a unique individual's personal experience. This charge extends to choosing the theme of the stories for that day, and all but two days have topics assigned: examples of the power of fortune; examples of the power of human will; love tales that end tragically; love tales that end happily; witty replies that save the speaker; tricks that women play on men; tricks that people play on each other in general; examples of virtue. Only Dioneo, who usually tells the tenth tale each day, has the right to tell a tale on any topic he wishes, due to his wit.

Each day also includes a short introduction and conclusion to continue the frame of the tales by describing other daily activities besides story-telling. These frame tale interludes frequently include transcriptions of Italian folk songs. The interactions among tales in a day, or across days, as Boccaccio spins variations and reversals of previous material, form a whole and not just a collection of stories.

Day IV, Novella 5.

Lisabetta's brothers slay her lover: he appears to her in a dream, and shows her where he is buried: she privily disinters the head, and sets it in a pot of basil, whereon she daily weeps a great while. The pot being taken from her by her brothers, she dies, not long after.

Elisa's story ended, the king bestowed a few words of praise upon it, and then laid the burden of discourse upon Filomena, who, full of compassion for the woes of Gerbino and his lady, heaved a piteous sigh, and thus began:

-- My story, gracious ladies, will not be of folk of so high a rank as those of whom Elisa has told us, but perchance 'twill not be less touching. 'Tis brought to my mind by the recent mention of Messina, where the matter befell.

Know then that there were at Messina three young men, that were brothers and merchants, who were left very rich on the death of their father, who was of San Gimignano; and they had a sister, Lisabetta by name, a girl fair enough, and no less debonair, but whom, for some reason or another, they had not as yet bestowed in marriage. The three brothers had also in their shop a young Pisan, Lorenzo by name, who managed all their affairs, and who was so goodly of person and gallant, that Lisabetta bestowed many a glance upon him, and began to regard him with extraordinary favour; which Lorenzo marking from time to time, gave up all his other amours, and in like manner began to affect her, and so, their loves being equal, 'twas not long before they took heart of grace, and did that which each most desired.

Wherein continuing to their no small mutual solace and delight, they neglected to order it with due secrecy, whereby one night as Lisabetta was going to Lorenzo's room, she, all unwitting, was observed by the eldest of the brothers, who, albeit much distressed by what he had learnt, yet, being a young man of discretion, was swayed by considerations more seemly, and, allowing no word to escape him, spent the night in turning the

¹ The title is a combination of two Greek words meaning "ten" (δέκα *déka*) and "day" (ἡμέρα *hēméra*).

affair over in his mind in divers ways. On the morrow he told his brothers that which, touching Lisabetta and Lorenzo, he had observed in the night, which, that no shame might thence ensue either to them or to their sister, they after long consultation determined to pass over in silence, making as if they had seen or heard nought thereof, until such time as they in a safe and convenient manner might banish this disgrace from their sight before it could go further.

Adhering to which purpose, they jested and laughed with Lorenzo as they had been wont; and after a while pretending that they were all three going forth of the city on pleasure, they took Lorenzo with them; and being come to a remote and very lonely spot, seeing that 'twas apt for their design, they took Lorenzo, who was completely off his guard, and slew him, and buried him on such wise that none was aware of it. On their return to Messina they gave out that they had sent him away on business; which was readily believed, because 'twas what they had been frequently used to do.

But as Lorenzo did not return, and Lisabetta questioned the brothers about him with great frequency and urgency, being sorely grieved by his long absence, it so befell that one day, when she was very pressing in her enquiries, one of the brothers said: -- "What means this? What hast thou to do with Lorenzo, that thou shouldst ask about him so often? Ask us no more, or we will give thee such answer as thou deservest." So the girl, sick at heart and sorrowful, fearing she knew not what, asked no questions; but many a time at night she called piteously to him, and besought him to come to her, and bewailed his long tarrying with many a tear, and ever yearning for his return, languished in total dejection.

But so it was that one night, when, after long weeping that her Lorenzo came not back, she had at last fallen asleep, Lorenzo appeared to her in a dream, wan and in utter disarray, his clothes torn to shreds and sodden; and thus, as she thought, he spoke: -- "Lisabetta, thou dost nought but call me, and vex thyself for my long tarrying, and bitterly upbraid me with thy tears; wherefore be it known to thee that return to thee I may not, because the last day that thou didst see me thy brothers slew me." After which, he described the place where they had buried him, told her to call and expect him no more, and vanished.

The girl then awoke, and doubting not that the vision was true, wept bitterly. And when morning came, and she was risen, not daring to say aught to her brothers, she resolved to go to the place indicated in the vision, and see if what she had dreamed were even as it had appeared to her. So, having leave to go a little way out of the city for recreation in company with a maid that had at one time lived with them and knew all that she did, she hied her thither with all speed; and having removed the dry leaves that were strewn about the place, she began to dig where the earth seemed least hard. Nor had she dug long, before she found the body of her hapless lover, whereon as yet there was no trace of corruption or decay; and thus she saw without any manner of doubt that her vision was true. And so, saddest of women, knowing that she might not bewail him there, she would gladly, if she could, have carried away the body and given it more honourable sepulture elsewhere; but as she might not so do, she took a knife, and, as best she could, severed the head from the trunk, and wrapped it in a napkin and laid it in the lap of her maid; and having covered the rest of the corpse with earth, she left the spot, having been seen by none, and went home.

There she shut herself up in her room with the head, and kissed it a thousand times in every part, and wept long and bitterly over it, till she had bathed it in her tears. She then wrapped it in a piece of fine cloth, and set it in a large and beautiful pot of the sort in which marjoram or basil is planted, and covered it with earth, and therein planted some roots of the goodliest basil of Salerno, and drenched them only with her tears, or water perfumed with roses or orange-blossoms. And 'twas her wont ever to sit beside this pot, and, all her soul one yearning, to pore upon it, as that which enshrined her Lorenzo, and when long time she had so done, she would bend over it, and weep a great while, until the basil was quite bathed in her tears.

Fostered with such constant, unremitting care, and nourished by the richness given to the soil by the decaying head that lay therein, the basil burgeoned out in exceeding great beauty and fragrance. And, the girl persevering ever in this way of life, the neighbours from time to time took note of it, and when her brothers marvelled to see her beauty ruined, and her eyes as it were evanished from her head, they told them of it, saying: -- "We have observed that such is her daily wont." Whereupon the brothers, marking her behaviour, chid her therefore once or twice, and as she heeded them not, caused the pot to be taken privily from her. Which, so soon as she missed

it, she demanded with the utmost instance and insistence, and, as they gave it not back to her, ceased not to wail and weep, insomuch that she fell sick; nor in her sickness craved she aught but the pot of basil. Whereat the young men, marvelling mightily, resolved to see what the pot might contain; and having removed the earth they espied the cloth, and therein the head, which was not yet so decayed, but that by the curled locks they knew it for Lorenzo's head. Passing strange they found it, and fearing lest it should be bruited abroad, they buried the head, and, with as little said as might be, took order for their privy departure from Messina, and hied them thence to Naples.

The girl ceased not to weep and crave her pot, and, so weeping, died. Such was the end of her disastrous love; but not a few in course of time coming to know the truth of the affair, there was one that made the song that is still sung: to wit: --

A thief he was, I swear, A sorry Christian he,
That took my basil of Salerno fair, etc.

John Keats. "Isabella, Or, The Pot of Basil" (1818)

"Isabella, or the Pot of Basil" (1818) is a narrative poem by John Keats adapted from a story in Boccaccio's *Decameron* (IV, 5). It tells the tale of a young woman whose family intend to marry her to "some high noble and his olive trees", but who falls for Lorenzo, one of her brothers's employees. When the brothers learn of this they murder Lorenzo and bury his body. His ghost informs Isabella in a dream. She exhumes the body and buries the head in a pot of basil which she tends obsessively, while pining away.



By William Holman Hunt (1863)

A story from Boccaccio.

I.

Fair Isabel, poor simple Isabel!
Lorenzo, a young palmer in Love's eye!
They could not in the self-same mansion dwell
Without some stir of heart, some malady;
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.

II.

With every morn their love grew tenderer,
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
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.

III.

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

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.

IV.

A whole long month of May in this sad plight
 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.”--
 “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;

V.

Until sweet Isabella’s untouch’d cheek
 Fell sick within the rose’s just domain,
 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,
 “And at the least ‘twill startle off her cares.”

VI.

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
 Stifled 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!

VII.

So once more he had wak’d and anguished
 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,
 “Lorenzo!”--here she ceas’d her timid quest,
 But in her tone and look he read the rest.

VIII.

“O Isabella, I can half perceive
 “That I may speak my grief into thine ear;
 “If thou didst ever any thing believe,
 “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.

IX.

“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,
 And poesied with hers in dewy rhyme:
 Great bliss was with them, and great
 happiness
 Grew, like a lusty flower in June’s caress.

X.

Parting they seem’d to tread upon the air,
 Twin roses by the zephyr blown apart
 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,
 And bade the sun farewell, and joy’d his fill.

XI.

All close they met again, before the dusk
Had taken from the stars its pleasant veil,
All close they met, all eyes, before the dusk
Had taken from the stars its pleasant veil,
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.

XII.

Were they unhappy then?--It cannot be--
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;
Except in such a page where Theseus' spouse
Over the pathless waves towards him bows.

XIII.

But, for the general award of love,
The little sweet doth kill much bitterness;
Though Dido silent is in under-grove,
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 almsmen of spring-
bowers,
Know there is richest juice in poison-flowers.

XIV.

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
In blood from stinging whip;--with hollow
eyes
Many all day in dazzling river stood,
To take the rich-ored driftings of the flood.

XV.

For them the Ceylon diver held his breath,
And went all naked to the hungry shark;

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,
That set sharp racks at work, to pinch and
peel.

XVI.

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?--
Why were they proud? Because red-lin'd
accounts
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?

XVII.

Yet were these Florentines as self-retired
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--
Quick cat's-paws on the generous stray-away,-
-
Great wits in Spanish, Tuscan, and Malay.

XVIII.

How was it these same ledger-men could spy
Fair Isabella in her downy nest?
How could they find out in Lorenzo's eye
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.

XIX.

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
Now they can no more hear thy ghittern's
tune,
For venturing syllables that ill beseem
The quiet glooms of such a piteous theme.

XX.

Grant thou a pardon here, and then the tale
Shall move on soberly, as it is meet;
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,
An echo of thee in the north-wind sung.

XXI.

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
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.

XXII.

And many a jealous conference had they,
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;
For they resolved in some forest dim
To kill Lorenzo, and there bury him.

XXIII.

So on a pleasant morning, as he leant
Into the sun-rise, o'er the balustrade
Of the garden-terrace, towards him they bent
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.

XXIV.

"To-day we purpose, ay, this hour we mount
"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,
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.

XXV.

And as he to the court-yard pass'd along,
Each third step did he pause, and listen'd oft
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
Smile through an in-door lattice, all delight.

XXVI.

"Love, Isabel!" 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
"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.

XXVII.

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

XXVIII.

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,
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.

XXIX.

They told their sister how, with sudden speed,
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,
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.

XXX.

She weeps alone for pleasures not to be;
Sorely she wept until the night came on,
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,

And on her couch low murmuring, "Where?
O where?"

XXXI.

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--
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.

XXXII.

In the mid days of autumn, on their eves
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
From his north cavern. So sweet Isabel
By gradual decay from beauty fell,

XXXIII.

Because Lorenzo came not. Oftentimes
She ask'd her brothers, with an eye all pale,
Striving to be itself, what dungeon climes
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.

XXXIV.

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,
Waking an Indian from his cloudy hall
With cruel pierce, and bringing him again
Sense of the gnawing fire at heart and brain.

XXXV.

It was a vision.--In the drowsy gloom,
The dull of midnight, at her couch's foot
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
Had made a miry channel for his tears.

XXXVI.

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:
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.

XXXVII.

Its eyes, though wild, were still all dewy bright
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
In the forest,--and the sodden turfed dell,
Where, without any word, from stabs he fell.

XXXVIII.

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

XXXIX.

"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,
"And many a chapel bell the hour is telling,
"Paining me through: those sounds grow
strange to me,
"And thou art distant in Humanity.

XL.

"I know what was, I feel full well what is,
"And I should rage, if spirits could go mad;
"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
"A greater love through all my essence steal."

XLI.

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,
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;

XLII.

"Ha! ha!" 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:
"I'll visit thee for this, and kiss thine eyes,
"And greet thee morn and even in the skies."

XLIII.

When the full morning came, she had devised
 How she might secret to the forest hie;
 How she might find the clay, so dearly prized,
 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.

XLIV.

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
 betide,
 "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.

XLV.

Who hath not loiter'd in a green church-yard,
 And let his spirit, like a demon-mole,
 Work through the clayey soil and gravel hard,
 To see skull, 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
 When Isabella by Lorenzo knelt.

XLVI.

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;
 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.

XLVII.

Soon she turn'd up a soiled glove, whereon
 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:
 Then 'gan she work again; nor stay'd her care,
 But to throw back at times her veiling hair.

XLVIII.

That old nurse stood beside her wondering,
 Until her heart felt pity to the core
 At sight of such a dismal labouring,
 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.

XLIX.

Ah! wherefore all this wormy circumstance?
 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,
 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.

L.

With duller steel than the Persèan sword
 They cut away no formless monster's head,
 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.
 'Twas love; cold,--dead indeed, but not
 dethroned.

LI.

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
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.

LII.

Then in a silken scarf,--sweet with the dews
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,
And cover'd it with mould, and o'er it set
Sweet Basil, which her tears kept ever wet.

LIII.

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,
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.

LIV.

And so she ever fed it with thin tears,
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,
From the fast mouldering head there shut
from view:
So that the jewel, safely casketed,
Came forth, and in perfumed leafits spread.

LV.

O Melancholy, linger here awhile!
O Music, Music, breathe despondingly!
O Echo, Echo, from some sombre isle,
Unknown, Lethan, 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,
Tinting with silver wan your marble tombs.

LVI.

Moan hither, all ye syllables of woe,
From the deep throat of sad Melpomene!
Through bronzed lyre in tragic order go,
And touch the strings into a mystery;
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.

LVII.

O leave the palm to wither by itself;
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
Of youth and beauty should be thrown aside
By one mark'd out to be a Noble's bride.

LVIII.

And, furthermore, her brethren wonder'd
much
Why she sat drooping by the Basil green,
And why it flourish'd, as by magic touch;
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.

LIX.

Therefore they watch'd a time when they
might sift
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
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.

LX.

Yet they contriv'd to steal the Basil-pot,
And to examine it in secret place:
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,
With blood upon their heads, to banishment.

LXI.

O Melancholy, turn thine eyes away!
O Music, Music, breathe despondingly!
O Echo, Echo, on some other day,
From isles Lethean, sigh to us--O sigh!

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.

LXII.

Piteous she look'd on dead and senseless
things,
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
'Twas hid from her: "For cruel 'tis," said she,
"To steal my Basil-pot away from me."

LXIII.

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
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!"