

Boccaccio's Untold Tale

BY HARRY KEMP

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PERSONS OF THE DRAMA.

FLORIO [*a poet*].

OLIVIA [*Florio's mistress*].

VIOLANTE [*a Florentine noblewoman*].

LIZZIA [*Florio's serving-woman*].

DIONEIO [*a member of Boccaccio's party*].

ONE VOICE.

ANOTHER VOICE.

VARIOUS PROCESSIONS BEARING THE DEAD.

TIME: *The year of the Great Plague, A. D. 1348.*

PLACE: *Florence.*

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BOCCACCIO'S UNTOLD TALE

A PLAY BY HARRY KEMP

[SCENE: *A lower room in Florio's house. It is wide and simply furnished.*

In the center, at back, is a large doorway, hung with great black arras. In the right-hand extreme corner is a small altar to the Virgin.

In wall, at back, high up on left, a small window.

A smaller doorway, hung with arras of black, is on the left, well toward the front. This doorway gives on the study of the poet.

At rise of curtain the stage is lit with the uncertain light of tapers.

Lizzia, the old servant, is discovered kneeling at the altar.

Soon she rises, crossing herself devoutly.

Demurringly and with deprecating shakes of the head, she begins hanging wreaths about the walls of the room.

After the hanging of each wreath she crosses herself, and, with agitated piety verging on superstition, she bends the knee briefly before altar.

Now the wreaths are all in place.... Through the small window the grayness that comes before dawn begins to glimmer in.

One by one Lizzia snuffs out the tapers.

For a moment everything is left in the gray half-darkness.

But now Lizzia draws aside the large black arras in the back. There is revealed a magnificent panoramic view of medieval Florence, flushing gradually from pearl-gray to soft, delicate rose, then to the full gold of accomplished sunrise.

Again the old woman kneels at the altar.

Enter, through the open doorway at back, Violante--rather tall, good-looking, quite dark.

Violante stands silent for a moment. One can see that it is in her thought to wait till Lizzia finishes her devotions ... then she becomes impatient and breaks in on them.]

VIOLANTE

Lizzia, where bides your master, Florio?
I sped a servant hither yesterday,
To bid him come to me, and now, this morning,
I come myself.

LIZZIA

For three days he has looked upon no one.
Even I, who wait upon him, have not seen him.

VIOLANTE

Where keeps he, then?

LIZZIA [*indicating the small doorway*].

Yonder, within that arras.

VIOLANTE

Summon him forth!
Say the Lady Violante waits his presence.

LIZZIA

He will grow wroth with me--nor will he greet you.

VIOLANTE

Fears he, then, the Plague so? Is he too such
As dare not walk abroad nor breathe the air
Lest he should drink infection?

LIZZIA

Not so, Lady, but he--

VIOLANTE

Tell him, then,
Our friend Boccaccio, the story-teller,
Has shaped a brave device against the Plague....
Before the sun climbs higher into day
And the night's Dead are heaped up in the streets
For buriers and priests to draw away,
A group of goodly ladies and gentlemen
Go forth to a sequestered country place
Remote from Florence and invisible Death.
There, in green gardens full of birds and leaves,
The blue, cloud-wandering heaven spread above,
We shall beguile the time with merriment,
Music and song and telling of many tales,
Trusting that Death, glutted with multitudes,
Will pass us by.... We need but Florio
To bring our perfect pleasure to the brim.

LIZZIA [*obstinately*]

But he will see no one, Lady, not even you.
He is--he is--

VIOLANTE

Not smitten by the Plague?

LIZZIA [*hesitating*]

Nay, he has taken a vow of close seclusion.

VIOLANTE [*confidently*]

But he knows not I am here--the Lady Violante! [*A pause.*]
[*Impetuously*] Go, tell him it is I,--
Nor take upon yourself such high command!

LIZZIA [*somewhat resentfully*]

I am a servant,
I only do as he commanded me....
[*Barring way.*]

VIOLANTE [*distractedly*]

Strange that he should so change in ten days' space.
[*With passionate abandonment*]
Old woman, go this instant--summon him!
I will abide your crabbed ways no longer.

LIZZIA [*stung to retaliation*]

Lady, he would not look upon your face
If you made him ruler of the world for it.

VIOLANTE [*flaming*]

What new freak of his is this?
He is as full of moods as any woman....

But I had never thought--
[*Determined*]
I will go to him!

LIZZIA [*again barring way*]

I could tell you many things,
But I would spare you.

VIOLANTE

Spare me!... you insolent, presumptuous old woman,
What have I,
I, the Lady Violante Ugolini,
To do with your good master, Florio,
Beyond a fostering friendship for his song!
Else he were nothing to me....
You are presuming on your age and service--
He shall rebuke you for this....

LIZZIA

Very well, Lady, if you must know--
He has sworn that he will look upon no one
Till he behold--Olivia!

VIOLANTE [*startled*]

Olivia!... who is Olivia?

LIZZIA

She is a girl who came from Padua
Hither, to flee the Plague ... and fled in vain.
He has loved her just ten days ... since first she came....

She came to him, a stranger, singing songs--
His songs!

VIOLANTE

And flattering him so--he loved her!

LIZZIA

Nay, she was beautiful, my noble lady,--
Surpassing wonderful... "His shining dream
Of ivory and gold," he called her....

VIOLANTE [*coldly*]

What has all this to do with me?
[*Relapsing into forgetful eagerness.*]
Tell me, where, then, is his Olivia now?

LIZZIA

The Plague! He gave her to a doctor's care,
Beggaring himself therefor, as one who loves!

VIOLANTE

And now he shuts himself away for grief
Because she died!... But, if she be dead,
Wherefore these garlands?--
Or does he think she will come back, alive?

LIZZIA

The learned doctor swears if she survives

Three days, she shall not die.

VIOLANTE

Not die, in sooth!
Who is this man who resurrects the Dead?
Why, folk whose nerves and sinews sing with life
Sicken, fall down, and seethe with death and worms
Within an hour, and they, the few who live,
Living, curse God because they did not die....
He would best think of the Living, and forget
The Dead.

LIZZIA

Half-crazed with love, he dreams she will return....
This is the morning after the third day--
This is the very hour she would return.
Suppose the learned doctor keep his word?--
Hence have I hung these garlands.

[The sounds of a funeral procession heard approaching.... The procession passes the large doorway, going by, along the street, without. The people bear candles.... They pass slowly by the open door ... bodies being carried in shrouds.]

ONE VOICE

We bore the son ... and now we bear the father....

ANOTHER VOICE

And I or you, mayhap, will be the next.

LIZZIA [*continuing*]

These wreaths, they seem a mockery of Heaven.
I pray that God will smite me not--I do
What I am bid!...

VIOLANTE [*half to herself*]

She will not come!...
[*To Lizzia*]
Is there nothing will cure his madness?

LIZZIA

Even if she die they are to bring her hither....

VIOLANTE

Hither? And all corrupt? Then Death will strike you both!

LIZZIA

Lady, I am so old I'd rather sleep
Than walk this sinful, weary world; and be--
He will unshroud her, kiss her lips, and die!

VIOLANTE [*with great bitterness*]

Fie, this our Florio--he has loved before,
And he will love again, and yet again....
Women's beauty he loves, not any woman!

LIZZIA

What you have said were true ten days ago--

Do I not know him, Lady?... But a change
Has come upon him that I marvel at--
So great a change in such a little while....
Ah, looked you on them when they were together,
Saw you how he is caught up in her face
And all the beauty of her, you would say
"Here is a love, at last, that climbs from earth to heaven!"

VIOLANTE [*laughing harshly*]

It is her beauty he loved; not she
The thing he loved! A poet, he!...
[*A pause.*]
It were as well you tore these garlands down:
If, by a miracle, she should return,
The Plague will have marked her with such ugliness
That even you will shine like Helen of Troy beside her!
Much will he care, then, if she sing his songs!
Had she a voice like a garden of nightingales
He could not listen to her without loathing....

[*Sounds of approach of another funeral procession.*]

VIOLANTE [*continuing*]

Pray draw the arras, Lizzia, and close out
The things that they bring by.... They have begun
To move the night's innumerable Dead.

[*Lizzia draws the large arras.... From now on, till the very last, just before climax, sound and murmur of processions are continually heard.*]

VIOLANTE [*persistently*]

I think she will not come--
But, if she does, she should be spared the cruelty

Of his heart's change,
And he, her marred, plague-broken face!
Stand aside--let me pass....

LIZZIA [*barring way again*]

He took his oath
Before that altar, to the most high God!
You shall not break his vow....

VIOLANTE

Let me go to him--here are my jewels!

FLORIO [*calling from within*]

Who is it speaks without? Whose voice is this
Wrangling and breaking in upon my peace?

LIZZIA

The Lady Violante Ugolini!

FLORIO

To-day, of all days, must I be alone....

[*Florio pushes out arras from small doorway and stands before it,
so that he remains unseen to Violante and Lizzia.*]

FLORIO [*to Lizzia*]

Go, Lizzia, I will speak with the Lady....
Have you the wreaths hung, Lizzia?

LIZZIA

Aye, master Florio!

FLORIO

Have you the table heaped with delicacies
In the green space by the fountain-shaken pool?

LIZZIA

I go to set the viands now, my master.

[Lizzia goes out.]

FLORIO

Violante, if you would speak with me,
Stay where you are--I cannot look upon you.

VIOLANTE

Not look upon me?

FLORIO

Nor must you look on me.... I have vowed a vow!

VIOLANTE

How strange you are!...
I had thought to rush into your arms!...

Have you forgotten so soon the oaths you took?

[She starts toward him.]

FLORIO *[hearing the rustle of her garment.]*

Move one step further and I draw the arras!

VIOLANTE *[halting and hesitating]*

Have you forgotten the first time you saw my face
And sent a sonnet to me?... It seems but a day
Since you were awed by my nobility....
And when I let you press your burning lips
Against my hand, you swore it made you God!

[Sadly]

From that time it was not far to my mouth....
And, after that, what with the shining moon,
And nightingales beginning in the dusk,
And songs and music that you made for me--
In a little while I was entirely yours!...

FLORIO

Remember that young nobleman who died
For love of you?... I was your pastime, merely that!
And so I sipped what honey came my way.
But why do you come now?
Did you not leave me without a word?

VIOLANTE

My father....

[Sombrely] My father whom the Pestilence has smitten--

FLORIO [*quickly*]

You sent me no message.

VIOLANTE

Every door was watched ... he might have had you slain....
He bore me off to Rome....

FLORIO

You loved me, then?

VIOLANTE

And did not you love me?

FLORIO

I could have sworn I did.

VIOLANTE

O Florio!...
Where is my pride of rank, my woman's shame.
That I should come like this to you!

FLORIO

Speak not so, Violante--I pray you go!

VIOLANTE

You love another, then?

FLORIO [*ecstatically*]

I have loved beauty, beauty all my life!

VIOLANTE

We are not metaphors and pale abstractions,
We women ... nor would we be prized alone
For smooth perfections.... [*Low and intense*] Say that you loved a
woman
Smitten with the Plague, say, further, that she lived--
One among ten thousand--that she came back to you,
[The one thing sure] hideous and marred--

FLORIO

You try me sorely!
Violante, I pray you, go!

VIOLANTE [*persistently*]

I have come hither
To bid you come away with me.

FLORIO

It may not be.

VIOLANTE [*slowly*]

The other one--there is another one!--
I pity her!

FLORIO

You need not.

VIOLANTE

Ah, then, there is another?

FLORIO

Have you no pride, my Lady Violante?

VIOLANTE

That I have not,
For shameless is the heart that loves.

FLORIO

Then shamelessly I love
Another face, another heart and body,
Another soul, unto eternity--
She is all beauty to me, and all life--
So shall she be forever!

VIOLANTE

Forever? That is what you swore to me.

FLORIO

I have not sworn a single oath to her,

And yet she made earth heaven in a day,
And earth continues heaven.... Go, noble Lady!

VIOLANTE

You have no pity on me?...
You see
How humbly I've become....

FLORIO

To pity you, Lady, would be cruel to her!...
In a month you will be glad.

VIOLANTE

You have slain me, Florio!

FLORIO

Farewell, Violante!

*[Violante affects to go. But she stops quickly at large door in
back and reënters on tiptoe. Florio withdraws to his study again,
after listening for a moment.]*

LIZZIA *[reëntering]*

You have not gone, my Lady Violante?

VIOLANTE

I will not go
Till I have looked upon this woman's face!

[As she finishes these words, the great black arras in the back is listed and a hooded and veiled woman enters. She stands regarding the two other women in silence.]

VIOLANTE

Ah!

LIZZIA

The miracle has come to pass!

[Crosses herself.]

VIOLANTE

Do they call you Olivia? Speak, woman!

OLIVIA

Yea, I am she--but where is Florio?

[Violante straightens, proud and erect, as if she had been struck an invisible blow.]

LIZZIA

He waits for you within.

OLIVIA

So he had faith I would not die?

LIZZIA

He had these garlands hung for your return.
He has lived beneath a holy vow, the days
You were not here: shut in his room,
Yours must be the first face
He sees, on his return to light and life.
He must have fallen asleep from weariness
Or he had heard your voice.

[*To Violante.*]

Now, Lady Violante, you must go!

VIOLANTE [*indignant*]

How? I must go?

LIZZIA

You would not stay?

VIOLANTE

Yea, I would stay to see this love grow dark
And shrink to hate.

OLIVIA [*astonished*]

And shrink to hate?

VIOLANTE

When you remove your veil
Behind which ugliness that beggars hell
Lies hidden--

OLIVIA [*dazed*]

Ugliness?

VIOLANTE

Cast by your veil!...

Well may you shrink from your own hideousness

Since the foul plague has withered up your face

And seared it till you die....

There shines your mirror, wrought of polished brass--

How many hours you have dallied at it

Only the beauty that you once possessed

Can tell.

You will no longer find a use for it.

OLIVIA [*recovering herself*]

I trust I shall!

LIZZIA [*to Olivia*]

Alas, dear God! And is it true, Olivia?

OLIVIA [*to Lizzia*]

Would he not love me still if it were true?

LIZZIA [*to Olivia*]

I am old and wretched and full of woe.

I have known life too long.

VIOLANTE [*to Olivia*]

He whose one cry is beauty! How could *that* be?

OLIVIA [*almost singing in speech*]

Then, God be praised, I need not try him thus!
For God has wrought two miracles with me:
I live, and I am beautiful!

VIOLANTE

Unveil your face, then--give yourself to sight.

OLIVIA

His must be the first eyes that look on me.

VIOLANTE

Ah, so you trust that you, with fond deceit,
May find some magic way to cozen him?

LIZZIA [*with great emotion*]

Go, Lady--I see darkness in the air,
I thrill to some strange horror, yet unguessed....
Go, Lady Violante, I pray you, go!

[*Lizzia lifts arras in back for Violante's exit. Violante does not move from where she stands.*]

VIOLANTE [*persistently, to Olivia*]

Woman it is your beauty that he loved,
And that alone ... just as he loves a flower
Or sunset.... That gone, lo, his love is gone!

OLIVIA

Strange woman, there is evil in your voice!
And yet I know he loves me for myself,
Taking my beauty, none the less, in gladness
Like any transitory gift from God.

VIOLANTE

And yet you dare not put him to the test?

OLIVIA

What test?

VIOLANTE

To make him first believe
That you are ugly!

OLIVIA

I would not toy with such a splendid gift
As a man's love.

VIOLANTE [*mocking*]

Ah ... in sooth?

OLIVIA

How strange you look ... yet stranger is your speech.

VIOLANTE

Before you came--whom loved he then?

OLIVIA

I do not think he was like other men.

VIOLANTE

Like other men he took and tossed aside,
Deceived and lied and went from heart to heart
Reaping the richness of each woman's soul.

OLIVIA

Go, lest I strike you!

VIOLANTE

Poor, fond, believing child--
Now I would not have you test his love!

OLIVIA [*stirred*]

By all the saints, I'll put him to the test!...
[*As Violante steps closer to her*]
Nay, I'll not let you look upon my face....
He must, as I have vowed, look on it first,

Nor will I break that vow--[*Her vanity conquering*]
But lift yon mirror
And you shall look in it and see me there
Reflected!...

[*Violante lifts mirror so she and Lizzia can see reflection.*]

OLIVIA [*with simplicity*]

Keep your backs so!
[*Unveiling briefly, then drawing veil again.*]
There! Have I lied?

VIOLANTE

He always worshiped beauty.... You are fair!

OLIVIA

Soon will you know our love has mighty wings
Outsoaring time into eternity!

VIOLANTE

I'll have him forth--are you ready for the trial?

OLIVIA

Do you persuade him of my ugliness....
If he loves me not I shall go forth and die--
Then life will be far too like death to live!

LIZZIA [*agonized*]

My little children, you must not do this thing!
Love is too high a gift to play with so.
God only has the right to put the heart
Of man to trial!

VIOLANTE [*to Lizzia*]

Will you be quiet, old woman!

OLIVIA [*to Lizzia*]

I would not hold him if he only loved
My beauty, and not me. The test is just....

VIOLANTE [*to Lizzia*]

Go you, inform him of her return....
But tell him that that flower which was her face
Is shriveled up and lean as any hag's.

LIZZIA

Now God forbid I should deceive him so!

VIOLANTE

Not even for gold?

LIZZIA

Have you no fear of God?

[*A stir is heard within.*]

VIOLANTE

Hush!... I will do it, then.

[Going up to small arras over study door, she calls.]

Florio!... Florio!...

FLORIO *[from within, after a brief space]*

Who is it calls me?

VIOLANTE

It is I, Violante!

FLORIO

Why have you come again?

VIOLANTE

I have returned, Florio,
In strange times, bearing strange news.

FLORIO

My soul is full of death--I pray you go!

VIOLANTE

It could not be--aye, it is passing strange!--
She said her name was "Olivia."

FLORIO

Olivia, ah, she lives!

VIOLANTE

Then, it is true? You love this shriveled woman?

FLORIO

Shriveled woman?

VIOLANTE

Ugly and bent and gray--a woman
Who says in as few words she is your mistress.

FLORIO

Has she come? Is she here?... Go, Violante--
Go, leave us two alone!

VIOLANTE

She walked as one bewitched in a dream.
She seemed to fear.... I bade her wait without....
Florio, could it be true you loved this woman?

FLORIO

Has all the brightness fallen from her eyes,
The glory and the wonder from her face?

VIOLANTE

She *lives!* How few have had the plague and *lived!*

FLORIO

Alas, woe, woe is me!

VIOLANTE [*triumphantly, to Olivia*]

You heard?

[*To Florio.*]

Come forth--she's at the threshold.

FLORIO

Bid her wait.

Give me space for thought ... a little space....

This is almost as horrible as her death....

[*Long silence. The women wait.... Groaning within. Olivia starts forward to go to Florio.*]

VIOLANTE [*to Olivia*]

Do you flinch now? I knew you would not dare!

[*Olivia stops. Proudly she remains still.*]

VIOLANTE [*as arras stirs*]

Now bear *your* part--continue the deceit.

OLIVIA [*in a frightened voice*]

I know he loves me. Yet a little while
And I will draw my veil!
[Another groan. Olivia starts forward again.]
Oh, I cannot!

VIOLANTE *[mocking]*

I knew you would not dare!

[Again Olivia stops still. Now, after a long pause, during which death processions are heard to pass, the arras over the smaller doorway is slowly put aside. Florio enters, swaying. He holds his cloak about his brow.]

FLORIO

Where is Olivia?

OLIVIA *[feigning with an effort]*

Florio, God pity you and me--
I had rather died!...

FLORIO

Oh, speak not so!

OLIVIA

My "beauty clean and golden as the sun,"
As once you sang it, has become so gross
And fearful, that I veil it, broken with shame,
From eyes of men.... *[A pause.]* 'Tis well you cloak your eyes,
For should I drop my veil through which I glance--*[Another pause.]*

Shall I go?

FLORIO [*breathing heavily*]

No ... for I love you ... bide with me....
[*With great effort*] ... Though you be foul, Olivia!

[As he still stands muffled, Olivia grows more and more frightened at what she is doing, and now, in complete surrender to terror, gives over the deceit and speaks the truth.]

OLIVIA

Florio, my Florio--draw down your arm....
No longer need you fear to look on me--
It was a test, my love, a cruel test!

[She draws aside her veil, the other women in back of her, Florio obliquely in front. Her face is seen to be one of surpassing loveliness.

Florio, groaning, keeps his face cloaked and does not speak.]

OLIVIA

Look, my beloved, or I shall go mad!

[Olivia tugs at his arm. He lowers it. He exposes a sightless face.]

LIZZIA [*breaking in on the awful pause*].

Self-blinded, my poor master!

VIOLANTE

Oh, Florio, what is this that I have done!

[Olivia has dropped slowly back, stricken dumb with voiceless terror. Her throat works convulsively with a scream which now rushes forth.]

Florio falls to his knees, again covering his face and bowing his head. Olivia comes and kneels, grief-stricken, beside him, putting one arm about him in support.]

OLIVIA [*sobbing*]

There is ... no one ... that's ... uglier ... than I!

FLORIO [*convulsively*]

You were the glory of the world, Olivia!...
And now ... your beauty ... that is ... dead ... will always be ...
to me ...
The glory of ... the world!... forever and forever!...

OLIVIA

Oh, if you could but see my ugliness--
I think there's nothing like it in the world!
O God, why did I not die an hour ago!

VIOLANTE [*crazed anew with jealousy*]

Florio, Florio--Olivia lies!
Her beauty floods the very room with light--
You are deceived most horribly!

OLIVIA

Command that woman hence;
She is the source and cause of all our ill.

FLORIO

What does this mean? My soul is sick to death!

VIOLANTE

I tell you, Florio, that she lies to you.

[To Lizzia.]

Tell him the truth, old woman, and beware,
As you have fear of Hell, belief in God,
And hope of Heaven, to perjure not your soul!

LIZZIA *[at first frightened and irresolute, then quietly determined.]*

God help me--she is surpassingly--ugly!

[Returning Violante glare for glare.]

Her ugliness--!

[Breaking down, she goes to altar and drops on knees before it.]

FLORIO

Go, Violante!

VIOLANTE

I could curse God for this!

[Violante staggers toward the great black curtain in doorway, where she supports herself by clinging to it.]

FLORIO

Olivia, come back to me from the great Dark--
All life is but a ghost. Where are you, Olivia?

OLIVIA

I am here--close to you, Florio!

FLORIO

What have you women done to me!

[To Olivia.] Your face!

An evil dream is in my heart!

[He gropes, catches her quickly on each side of the head with both hands. He draws her down to him. He runs his fingers flickeringly over the smooth, rosy beauty of her face....

Then, with an eyeless, uplifted countenance which reveals complete understanding and an abyss of horror and madness, he slowly pushes Olivia away....

He lifts his fingers up grotesquely in the air, each distinct and widespread--painfully, as if fire spurted out of the ends of them. Olivia weeps....

Lizzia intones prayers....

Violante holds herself erect and triumphant, clinging to the great arras in back, struggling for strength to go out.

At this moment another death-procession passes.... A Miserere is

chanted....

A dawn of horror breaks over Violante's face ... she shrinks inward from the passing procession, feeling the huge horror of the Pestilence.

Olivia gathers Florio's unresisting head to her bosom....

The sound of the Miserere dies off....

Into this tableau breaks Dioneo. Slowly he parts the arras.]

DIONE0 [*grimacing, and seeing, at first, only Lizzia at the altar.*]

Bestir yourself, old woman--
Where is your master, Florio,
And Lady Violante Ugolini?...
This is no time for lovers' dallying....
Tell them that Seignior Boccaccio
Sends word through me that we must wait no longer.
And, furthermore, he bids me say--that

*[Violante falls in a faint across his feet. Dioneo sees all.
Shrinking back.]*

Merciful God!...

[Curtain.]