



How Lisa Loved the King
Illustrated Edition

George Eliot

D O D O



P R E S S

How Lisa Loved the King

George Eliot

AUTHOR OF "DANIEL DERONDA," "MIDDLEMARCH," "ADAMBEDE," ETC., ETC

WITH NEW ILLUSTRATIONS FROM ORIGINAL DESIGNS

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Six hundred years ago, in Dante's time,
Before his cheek was furrowed by deep rhyme;
When Europe, fed afresh from Eastern story,
Was like a garden tangled with the glory
Of flowers hand-planted and of flowers air-sown,
Climbing and trailing, budding and full-blown,
Where purple bells are tossed amid pink stars,
And springing blades, green troops in innocent wars,
Crowd every shady spot of teeming earth,
Making invisible motion visible birth,—

Six hundred years ago, Palermo town
Kept holiday. A deed of great renown,
A high revenge, had freed it from the yoke
Of hated Frenchmen; and from Calpe's rock
To where the Bosphorus caught the earlier sun,
'Twas told that Pedro, King of Aragon,
Was welcomed master of all Sicily,—
A royal knight, supreme as kings should be
In strength and gentleness that make high chivalry.

Spain was the favorite home of knightly grace,
Where generous men rode steeds of generous race;
Both Spanish, yet half Arab; both inspired
By mutual spirit, that each motion fired
With beauteous response, like minstrelsy
Afresh fulfilling fresh expectancy.
So, when Palermo made high festival,
The joy of matrons and of maidens all
Was the mock terror of the tournament,
Where safety, with the glimpse of danger blent,
Took exaltation as from epic song,
Which greatly tells the pains that to great life belong.

And in all eyes King Pedro was the king
Of cavaliers; as in a full-gemmed ring
The largest ruby, or as that bright star
Whose shining shows us where the Hyads are.
His the best genet, and he sat it best;
His weapon, whether tilting or in rest,
Was worthiest watching; and his face, once seen,
Gave to the promise of his royal mien

Such rich fulfilment as the opened eyes
Of a loved sleeper, or the long-watched rise
Of vernal day, whose joy o'er stream and meadow flies.

But of the maiden forms that thick enwreathed
The broad piazza, and sweet witchery breathed,
With innocent faces budding all arow,
From balconies and windows high and low,
Who was it felt the deep mysterious glow,
The impregnation with supernal fire
Of young ideal love, transformed desire,
Whose passion is but worship of that Best
Taught by the many-mingled creed of each young breast?



'Twas gentle Lisa, of no noble line,
Child of Bernardo, a rich Florentine,
Who from his merchant-city hither came
To trade in drugs; yet kept an honest fame,
And had the virtue not to try and sell
Drugs that had none. He loved his riches well,
But loved them chiefly for his Lisa's sake,
Whom with a father's care he sought to make
The bride of some true honorable man,—
Of Perdicone (so the rumor ran),
Whose birth was higher than his fortunes were,
For still your trader likes a mixture fair
Of blood that hurries to some higher strain
Than reckoning money's loss and money's gain.
And of such mixture good may surely come:
Lord's scions so may learn to cast a sum,
A trader's grandson bear a well-set head,
And have less conscious manners, better bred;
Nor, when he tries to be polite, be rude instead.

'Twas Perdicone's friends made overtures
To good Bernardo; so one dame assures
Her neighbor dame, who notices the youth
Fixing his eyes on Lisa; and, in truth,
Eyes that could see her on this summer day
Might find it hard to turn another way.
She had a pensive beauty, yet not sad;
Rather like minor cadences that glad

The hearts of little birds amid spring boughs:
And oft the trumpet or the joust would rouse
Pulses that gave her cheek a finer glow,
Parting her lips that seemed a mimic bow
By chiselling Love for play in coral wrought,
Then quickened by him with the passionate thought,
The soul that trembled in the lustrous night
Of slow long eyes. Her body was so slight,
It seemed she could have floated in the sky,
And with the angelic choir made symphony;
But in her cheek's rich tinge, and in the dark
Of darkest hair and eyes, she bore a mark
Of kinship to her generous mother—earth,
The fervid land that gives the plummy palm—trees birth.

She saw not Perdicone; her young mind
Dreamed not that any man had ever pined
For such a little simple maid as she:
She had but dreamed how heavenly it would be
To love some hero noble, beauteous, great,
Who would live stories worthy to narrate,
Like Roland, or the warriors of Troy,
The Cid, or Amadis, or that fair boy
Who conquered every thing beneath the sun,
And somehow, some time, died at Babylon
Fighting the Moors. For heroes all were good
And fair as that archangel who withstood
The Evil One, the author of all wrong,—
That Evil One who made the French so strong;
And now the flower of heroes must he be
Who drove those tyrants from dear Sicily,
So that her maids might walk to vespers tranquilly.

Young Lisa saw this hero in the king;
And as wood—lilies that sweet odors bring
Might dream the light that opes their modest eyne
Was lily—odored; and as rites divine,
Round turf—laid altars, or 'neath roofs of stone,
Draw sanctity from out the heart alone
That loves and worships: so the miniature
Perplexed of her soul's world, all virgin pure,
Filled with heroic virtues that bright form,
Raona's royalty, the finished norm
Of horsemanship, the half of chivalry;
For how could generous men avengers be,
Save as God's messengers on coursers fleet?—
These, scouring earth, made Spain with Syria meet
In one self—world where the same right had sway,
And good must grow as grew the blessed day.
No more: great Love his essence had endued
With Pedro's form, and, entering, subdued
The soul of Lisa, fervid and intense,
Proud in its choice of proud obedience
To hardship glorified by perfect reverence.

Sweet Lisa homeward carried that dire guest,
And in her chamber, through the hours of rest,
The darkness was alight for her with sheen
Of arms, and plumed helm; and bright between
Their commoner gloss, like the pure living spring
'Twixt porphyry lips, or living bird's bright wing
'Twixt golden wires, the glances of the king
Flashed on her soul, and waked vibrations there
Of known delights love—mixed to new and rare:

The impalpable dream was turned to breathing flesh,
Chill thought of summer to the warm close mesh
Of sunbeams held between the citron-leaves,
Clothing her life of life. Oh! she believes
That she could be content if he but knew
(Her poor small self could claim no other due)
How Lisa's lowly love had highest reach
Of winged passion, whereto winged speech
Would be scorched remnants left by mounting flame.
Though, had she such lame message, were it blame
To tell what greatness dwelt in her, what rank
She held in loving? Modest maidens shrank
From telling love that fed on selfish hope;
But love, as hopeless as the shattering song,
Wailed for loved beings who have joined the throng
Of mighty dead ones... Nay, but she was weak,
Knew only prayers and ballads, could not speak
With eloquence, save what dumb creatures have,
That with small cries and touches small boons crave.

She watched all day that she might see him pass
With knights and ladies; but she said, "Alas!
Though he should see me, it were all as one
He saw a pigeon sitting on the stone
Of wall or balcony: some colored spot
His eye just sees, his mind regardeth not.
I have no music-touch that could bring nigh
My love to his soul's hearing. I shall die,
And he will never know who Lisa was,—
The trader's child, whose soaring spirit rose
As hedge-born aloe-flowers that rarest years disclose.



"For were I now a fair deep-breasted queen
A-horseback, with blonde hair, and tunic green,
Gold-bordered, like Costanza, I should need
No change within to make me queenly there:
For they the royal-hearted women are
Who nobly love the noblest, yet have grace;
For needy suffering lives in lowliest place,
Carrying a choicer sunlight in their smile,
The heavenliest ray that pitieth the vile.
My love is such, it cannot choose but soar

Up to the highest; yet forevermore,
Though I were happy, throned beside the king,
I should be tender to each little thing
With hurt warm breast, that had no speech to tell
Its inward pang; and I would soothe it well
With tender touch, and with a low soft moan
For company: my dumb love—pang is lone,
Prisoned as topaz—beam within a rough—garbed stone."

So, inward—wailing, Lisa passed her days.
Each night the August moon with changing phase
Looked broader, harder, on her unchanged pain;
Each noon the heat lay heavier again
On her despair, until her body frail
Shrank like the snow that watchers in the vale
See narrowed on the height each summer morn;
While her dark glance burnt larger, more forlorn,
As if the soul within her, all on fire,
Made of her being one swift funeral—pyre.
Father and mother saw with sad dismay
The meaning of their riches melt away;
For without Lisa what would sequins buy?
What wish were left if Lisa were to die?
Through her they cared for summers still to come,
Else they would be as ghosts without a home
In any flesh that could feel glad desire.
They pay the best physicians, never tire
Of seeking what will soothe her, promising
That aught she longed for, though it were a thing
Hard to be come at as the Indian snow,
Or roses that on Alpine summits blow,
It should be hers. She answers with low voice,
She longs for death alone—death is her choice;
Death is the king who never did think scorn,
But rescues every meanest soul to sorrow born.

Yet one day, as they bent above her bed,
And watched her in brief sleep, her drooping head
Turned gently, as the thirsty flowers that feel
Some moist revival through their petals steal;
And little flutterings of her lids and lips
Told of such dreamy joy as sometimes dips
A skyey shadow in the mind's poor pool.
She oped her eyes, and turned their dark gems full
Upon her father, as in utterance dumb
Of some new prayer that in her sleep had come.
"What is it, Lisa?"—"Father, I would see
Minuccio, the great singer; bring him me."
For always, night and day, her unstilled thought,
Wandering all o'er its little world, had sought
How she could reach, by some soft pleading touch,
King Pedro's soul, that she who loved so much,
Dying, might have a place within his mind,—
A little grave which he would sometimes find
And plant some flower on it,—some thought, some memory kind.

Till in her dream she saw Minuccio
Touching his viola, and chanting low
A strain, that, falling on her brokenly,
Seemed blossoms lightly blown from off a tree;
Each burthened with a word that was a scent,—
Raona, Lisa, love, death, tournament;
Then in her dream she said, "He sings of me,
Might be my messenger; ah! now I see

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