

"Fra Lippo Lippi"

By Robert Browning

*Transcription, correction, editorial commentary, and markup
by Students and Staff at the University of Virginia, Tonya Howe*

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MEN AND WOMEN.
BY
ROBERT BROWNING.
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Fra Lippo Lippi

1 I am poor brother Lippo, by your leave!
2 You need not clap your torches to my face.
3 Zooks, what's to blame? you think you see a monk!
4 What, 'tis past midnight, and you go the rounds,
5 And here you catch me at an alley's end
6 Where sportive ladies leave their doors ajar?
7 The Carmine's my cloister: hunt it up,
8 Do,--harry out, if you must show your zeal,
9 Whatever rat, there, haps on his wrong hole,
10 And nip each softling of a wee white mouse,
11 Weke, weke, that's crept to keep him company!
12 Aha, you know your betters! Then, you'll take

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13 Your hand away that's fiddling on my throat,
14 And please to know me likewise. Who am I?
15 Why, one, sir, who is lodging with a friend
16 Three streets off--he's a certain . . . how d'ye call?
17 Master--a ...Cosimo of the Medici,
18 I' the house that caps the corner. Boh! you were best!
19 Remember and tell me, the day you're hanged,
20 How you affected such a gullet's-gripe!
21 But you, sir, it concerns you that your knaves
22 Pick up a manner nor discredit you:
23 Zooks, are we pilchards, that they sweep the streets
24 And count fair price what comes into their net?
25 He's Judas to a tittle, that man is!
26 Just such a face! Why, sir, you make amends.
27 Lord, I'm not angry! Bid your hang-dogs go
28 Drink out this quarter-florin to the health
29 Of the munificent House that harbours me
30 (And many more beside, lads! more beside!)
31 And all's come square again. I'd like his face--
32 His, elbowing on his comrade in the door

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33 With the pike and lantern,--for the slave that holds
34 John Baptist's head a-dangle by the hair
35 With one hand ("Look you, now," as who should say)

36 And his weapon in the other, yet unwiped!
37 It's not your chance to have a bit of chalk,
38 A wood-coal or the like? or you should see!
39 Yes, I'm the painter, since you style me so.
40 What, brother Lippo's doings, up and down,
41 You know them and they take you? like enough!
42 I saw the proper twinkle in your eye--
43 'Tell you, I liked your looks at very first.
44 Let's sit and set things straight now, hip to haunch.
45 Here's spring come, and the nights one makes up bands
46 To roam the town and sing out carnival,
47 And I've been three weeks shut within my mew,
48 A-painting for the great man, saints and saints
49 And saints again. I could not paint all night--
50 Ouf! I leaned out of window for fresh air.
51 There came a hurry of feet and little feet,
52 A sweep of lute strings, laughs, and whiffs of song, --

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53 *Flower o' the broom,*
54 *Take away love, and our earth is a tomb!*
55 *Flower o' the quince,*
56 *I let Lisa go, and what good in life since?*
57 *Flower o' the thyme--* and so on. Round they went.
58 Scarce had they turned the corner when a titter
59 Like the skipping of rabbits by moonlight,--three slim shapes,
60 And a face that looked up . . . zooks, sir, flesh and blood,
61 That's all I'm made of! Into shreds it went,
62 Curtain and counterpane and coverlet,
63 All the bed-furniture--a dozen knots,
64 There was a ladder! Down I let myself,
65 Hands and feet, scrambling somehow, and so dropped,
66 And after them. I came up with the fun
67 Hard by Saint Laurence, hail fellow, well met,--
68 *Flower o' the rose,*
69 *If I've been merry, what matter who knows?*
70 And so as I was stealing back again
71 To get to bed and have a bit of sleep

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72 Ere I rise up to-morrow and go work
73 On Jerome knocking at his poor old breast
74 With his great round stone to subdue the flesh,
75 You snap me of the sudden. Ah, I see!
76 Though your eye twinkles still, you shake your head--
77 Mine's shaved--a monk, you say--the sting 's in that!

78 If Master Cosimo announced himself,
79 Mum's the word naturally; but a monk!
80 Come, what am I a beast for? tell us, now!
81 I was a baby when my mother died
82 And father died and left me in the street.
83 I starved there, God knows how, a year or two
84 On fig-skins, melon-parings, rinds and shucks,
85 Refuse and rubbish. One fine frosty day,
86 My stomach being empty as your hat,
87 The wind doubled me up and down I went.
88 Old Aunt Lapaccia trussed me with one hand,
89 (Its fellow was a stinger as I knew)
90 And so along the wall, over the bridge,
91 By the straight cut to the convent. Six words there,

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92 While I stood munching my first bread that month:
93 "So, boy, you're minded," quoth the good fat father
94 Wiping his own mouth, 'twas refection-time,--
95 "To quit this very miserable world?
96 Will you renounce" . . . "the mouthful of bread?" thought I;
97 By no means! Brief, they made a monk of me;
98 I did renounce the world, its pride and greed,
99 Palace, farm, villa, shop, and banking-house,
100 Trash, such as these poor devils of Medici
101 Have given their hearts to--all at eight years old.
102 Well, sir, I found in time, you may be sure,
103 'Twas not for nothing--the good bellyful,
104 The warm serge and the rope that goes all round,
105 And day-long blessed idleness beside!
106 "Let's see what the urchin's fit for"--that came next.
107 Not overmuch their way, I must confess.
108 Such a to-do! They tried me with their books:
109 Lord, they'd have taught me Latin in pure waste!
110 *Flower o' the clove.*

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111 *All the Latin I construe is, "amo" I love!*
112 But, mind you, when a boy starves in the streets
113 Eight years together, as my fortune was,
114 Watching folk's faces to know who will fling
115 The bit of half-stripped grape-bunch he desires,
116 And who will curse or kick him for his pains,--
117 Which gentleman processional and fine,
118 Holding a candle to the Sacrament,
119 Will wink and let him lift a plate and catch

120 The droppings of the wax to sell again,
121 Or holla for the Eight and have him whipped,--
122 How say I?--nay, which dog bites, which lets drop
123 His bone from the heap of offal in the street,--
124 Why, soul and sense of him grow sharp alike,
125 He learns the look of things, and none the less
126 For admonition from the hunger-pinch.
127 I had a store of such remarks, be sure,
128 Which, after I found leisure, turned to use.
129 I drew men's faces on my copy-books,
130 Scrawled them within the antiphonary's marge,

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131 Joined legs and arms to the long music-notes,
132 Found eyes and nose and chin for A's and B's,
133 And made a string of pictures of the world
134 Betwixt the ins and outs of verb and noun,
135 On the wall, the bench, the door. The monks looked black.
136 "Nay," quoth the Prior, "turn him out, d'ye say?
137 In no wise. Lose a crow and catch a lark.
138 What if at last we get our man of parts,
139 We Carmelites, like those Camaldolese
140 And Preaching Friars, to do our church up fine
141 And put the front on it that ought to be!"
142 And hereupon he bade me daub away.
143 Thank you! my head being crammed, the walls a blank,
144 Never was such prompt disemburdening.
145 First, every sort of monk, the black and white,
146 I drew them, fat and lean: then, folk at church,
147 From good old gossips waiting to confess

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148 Their cribs of barrel-droppings, candle-ends,--
149 To the breathless fellow at the altar-foot,
150 Fresh from his murder, safe and sitting there
151 With the little children round him in a row
152 Of admiration, half for his beard and half
153 For that white anger of his victim's son
154 Shaking a fist at him with one fierce arm,
155 Signing himself with the other because of Christ
156 (Whose sad face on the cross sees only this
157 After the passion of a thousand years)
158 Till some poor girl, her apron o'er her head,
159 (Which the intense eyes looked through) came at eve
160 On tiptoe, said a word, dropped in a loaf,
161 Her pair of earrings and a bunch of flowers

162 (The brute took growling), prayed, and so was gone.
163 I painted all, then cried " `T#is ask and have;
164 Choose, for more's ready!"--laid the ladder flat,
165 And showed my covered bit of cloister-wall.
166 The monks closed in a circle and praised loud
167 Till checked, taught what to see and not to see,
168 Being simple bodies,--"That's the very man!

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169 Look at the boy who stoops to pat the dog!
170 That woman's like the Prior's niece who comes
171 To care about his asthma: it's the life!"
172 But there my triumph's straw-fire flared and funky;
173 Their betters took their turn to see and say:
174 The Prior and the learned pulled a face
175 And stopped all that in no time. "How? what's here?
176 Quite from the mark of painting, bless us all!
177 Faces, arms, legs, and bodies like the true
178 As much as pea and pea! it's devil's-game!
179 Your business is not to catch men with show,
180 With homage to the perishable clay,
181 But lift them over it, ignore it all,
182 Make them forget there's such a thing as flesh.
183 Your business is to paint the souls of men--
184 Man's soul, and it's a fire, smoke . . . no, it's not . . .
185 It's vapour done up like a new-born babe--
186 (In that shape when you die it leaves your mouth)
187 It's . . . well, what matters talking, it's the soul!
188 Give us no more of body than shows soul!
189 Here's Giotto, with his Saint a-praising God,
190 That sets us praising--why not stop with him?
191 Why put all thoughts of praise out of our head
192 With wonder at lines, colours, and what not?
193 Paint the soul, never mind the legs and arms!
194 Rub all out, try at it a second time.
195 Oh, that white smallish female with the breasts,
196 She's just my niece . . . Herodias, I would say,--

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197 The Prior's niece . . . patron-saint--is it so pretty
198 You can't discover if it means hope, fear,
199 Sorrow or joy? won't beauty go with these?
200 Suppose I've made her eyes all right and blue,
201 Can't I take breath and try to add life's flash,
202 And then add soul and heighten them three-fold?
203 Or say there's beauty with no soul at all--

204 (I never saw it--put the case the same--)
205 If you get simple beauty and nought else,
206 You get about the best thing God invents:
207 That's somewhat: and you'll find the soul you have missed,
208 Within yourself, when you return him thanks.
209 "Rub all out!" Well, well, there's my life, in short,
210 And so the thing has gone on ever since.
211 I'm grown a man no doubt, I've broken bounds:
212 You should not take a fellow eight years old
213 And make him swear to never kiss the girls.
214 I'm my own master, paint now as I please--
215 Having a friend, you see, in the Corner-house!
216 Lord, it's fast holding by the rings in front--
217 Those great rings serve more purposes than just
218 To plant a flag in, or tie up a horse!
219 And yet the old schooling sticks, the old grave eyes
220 Are peeping o'er my shoulder as I work,
221 The heads shake still--"It's art's decline, my son!
222 You're not of the true painters, great and old;
223 Brother Angelico's the man, you'll find;
224 Brother Lorenzo stands his single peer:
225 Fag on at flesh, you'll never make the third!"
226 *Flower o' the pine,*
227 *You keep your mistr ... manners, and I'll stick to mine!*
228 I'm not the third, then: bless us, they must know!
229 Don't you think they're the likeliest to know,
230 They with their Latin? So, I swallow my rage,
231 Clench my teeth, suck my lips in tight, and paint
232 To please them--sometimes do and sometimes don't;
233 For, doing most, there's pretty sure to come
234 A turn, some warm eve finds me at my saints--
235 A laugh, a cry, the business of the world--
236 (Flower o' the peach
237 Death for us all, and his own life for each!)
238 And my whole soul revolves, the cup runs over,
239 The world and life's too big to pass for a dream,
240 And I do these wild things in sheer despite,
241 And play the fooleries you catch me at,
242 In pure rage! The old mill-horse, out at grass
243 After hard years, throws up his stiff heels so,
244 Although the miller does not preach to him
245 The only good of grass is to make chaff.
246 What would men have? Do they like grass or no--
247 May they or mayn't they? all I want's the thing
248 Settled for ever one way. As it is,
249 You tell too many lies and hurt yourself:
250 You don't like what you only like too much,

251 You do like what, if given you at your word,
 252 You find abundantly detestable.
 253 For me, I think I speak as I was taught;
 254 I always see the garden and God there
 255 A-making man's wife: and, my lesson learned,
 256 The value and significance of flesh,
 257 I can't unlearn ten minutes afterwards.

258 You understand me: I'm a beast, I know.
 259 But see, now--why, I see as certainly
 260 As that the morning-star's about to shine,
 261 What will hap some day. We've a youngster here
 262 Comes to our convent, studies what I do,
 263 Slouches and stares and lets no atom drop:
 264 His name is Guidi--he'll not mind the monks--
 265 They call him Hulking Tom, he lets them talk--
 266 He picks my practice up--he'll paint apace.
 267 I hope so--though I never live so long,
 268 I know what's sure to follow. You be judge!
 269 You speak no Latin more than I, belike;
 270 However, you're my man, you've seen the world
 271 --The beauty and the wonder and the power,
 272 The shapes of things, their colours, lights and shades,
 273 Changes, surprises,--and God made it all!
 274 --For what? Do you feel thankful, ay or no,
 275 For this fair town's face, yonder river's line,
 276 The mountain round it and the sky above,
 277 Much more the figures of man, woman, child,
 278 These are the frame to? What's it all about?
 279 To be passed over, despised? or dwelt upon,
 280 Wondered at? oh, this last of course!--you say.
 281 But why not do as well as say,--paint these
 282 Just as they are, careless what comes of it?
 283 God's works--paint any one, and count it crime
 284 To let a truth slip. Don't object, "His works
 285 Are here already; nature is complete:
 286 Suppose you reproduce her--(which you can't)
 287 There's no advantage! you must beat her, then."
 288 For, don't you mark? we're made so that we love
 289 First when we see them painted, things we have passed
 290 Perhaps a hundred times nor cared to see;
 291 And so they are better, painted--better to us,
 292 Which is the same thing. Art was given for that;
 293 God uses us to help each other so,
 294 Lending our minds out. Have you noticed, now,
 295 Your cullion's hanging face? A bit of chalk,
 296 And trust me but you should, though! How much more,

297 If I drew higher things with the same truth!
298 That were to take the Prior's pulpit-place,
299 Interpret God to all of you! Oh, oh,
300 It makes me mad to see what men shall do
301 And we in our graves! This world's no blot for us,
302 Nor blank; it means intensely, and means good:
303 To find its meaning is my meat and drink.
304 "Ay, but you don't so instigate to prayer!"
305 Strikes in the Prior: "when your meaning's plain
306 It does not say to folk--remember matins,
307 Or, mind you fast next Friday!" Why, for this
308 What need of art at all? A skull and bones,
309 Two bits of stick nailed crosswise, or, what's best,
310 A bell to chime the hour with, does as well.
311 I painted a Saint Laurence six months since
312 At Prato, splashed the fresco in fine style:
313 "How looks my painting, now the scaffold's down?"
314 I ask a brother: "Hugely," he returns--
315 "Already not one phiz of your three slaves
316 Who turn the Deacon off his toasted side,
317 But's scratched and prodded to our heart's content,
318 The pious people have so eased their own
319 With coming to say prayers there in a rage:
320 We get on fast to see the bricks beneath.
321 Expect another job this time next year,
322 For pity and religion grow i' the crowd--
323 Your painting serves its purpose!" Hang the fools!
324 --That is--you'll not mistake an idle word
325 Spoke in a huff by a poor monk, God wot,
326 Tasting the air this spicy night which turns
327 The unaccustomed head like Chianti wine!
328 Oh, the church knows! don't misreport me, now!
329 It's natural a poor monk out of bounds
330 Should have his apt word to excuse himself:
331 And hearken how I plot to make amends.
332 I have bethought me: I shall paint a piece
333 ... There's for you! Give me six months, then go, see
334 Something in Sant' Ambrogio's! Bless the nuns!
335 They want a cast o' my office. I shall paint
336 God in the midst, Madonna and her babe,
337 Ringed by a bowery, flowery angel-brood,
338 Lilies and vestments and white faces, sweet
339 As puff on puff of grated orris-root
340 When ladies crowd to Church at midsummer.
341 And then i' the front, of course a saint or two--
342 Saint John' because he saves the Florentines,
343 Saint Ambrose, who puts down in black and white

344 The convent's friends and gives them a long day,
345 And Job, I must have him there past mistake,
346 The man of Uz (and Us without the z,
347 Painters who need his patience). Well, all these
348 Secured at their devotion, up shall come
349 Out of a corner when you least expect,
350 As one by a dark stair into a great light,
351 Music and talking, who but Lippo! I!--
352 Mazed, motionless, and moonstruck--I'm the man!
353 Back I shrink--what is this I see and hear?
354 I, caught up with my monk's-things by mistake,
355 My old serge gown and rope that goes all round,
356 I, in this presence, this pure company!
357 Where's a hole, where's a corner for escape?
358 Then steps a sweet angelic slip of a thing
359 Forward, puts out a soft palm--"Not so fast!"
360 --Addresses the celestial presence, "nay--
361 He made you and devised you, after all,
362 Though he's none of you! Could Saint John there draw--
363 His camel-hair make up a painting brush?
364 We come to brother Lippo for all that,
365 *Iste perfecit opus!* So, all smile--
366 I shuffle sideways with my blushing face
367 Under the cover of a hundred wings
368 Thrown like a spread of kirtles when you're gay
369 And play hot cockles, all the doors being shut,
370 Till, wholly unexpected, in there pops
371 The hothead husband! Thus I scuttle off
372 To some safe bench behind, not letting go
373 The palm of her, the little lily thing
374 That spoke the good word for me in the nick,
375 Like the Prior's niece . . . Saint Lucy, I would say.
376 And so all's saved for me, and for the church
377 A pretty picture gained. Go, six months hence!
378 Your hand, sir, and good-bye: no lights, no lights!
379 The street's hushed, and I know my own way back,
380 Don't fear me! There's the grey beginning. Zooks!