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VOLUME ONE

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The Last Ride Together (1855)

I

I said – Then, dearest, since 'tis so,
 Since now at length my fate I know,
 Since nothing all my love avails,
 Since all, my life seemed meant for, fails,
 Since this was written and needs must be –
 My whole heart rises up to bless
 Your name in pride and thankfulness!
 Take back the hope you gave, – I claim
 Only a memory of the same,
 10 – And this beside, if you will not blame,
 Your leave for one more last ride with me.

II

My mistress bent that brow of hers;
 Those deep dark eyes where pride demurs
 When pity would be softening through,
 Fixed me a breathing-while or two
 With life or death in the balance: right!
 The blood replenished me again;
 My last thought was at least not vain:
 I and my mistress, side by side
 20 Shall be together, breathe and ride,
 So, one day more am I deified.
 Who knows but the world may end tonight?

III

Hush! if you saw some western cloud
 All billowy-bosomed, over-bowed
 By many benedictions – sun's
 And moon's and evening-star's at once –
 And so, you, looking and loving best,
 Conscious grew, your passion drew
 Cloud, sunset, moonrise, star-shine too,
 30 Down on you, near and yet more near,
 Till flesh must fade for heaven was here! –
 Thus leant she and lingered – joy and fear!
 Thus lay she a moment on my breast.

IV

Then we began to ride. My soul
 Smoothed itself out, a long-cramped scroll
 Freshening and fluttering in the wind.
 Fast hopes already lay behind.
 What need to strive with a life awry?
 Had I said that, had I done this,
 40 So might I gain, so might I miss.
 Might she have loved me? just as well
 She might have hated, who can tell!
 Where had I been now if the worst befell?
 And here we are riding, she and I.

V

Fail I alone, in words and deeds?
 Why, all men strive and who succeeds?
 We rode; it seemed my spirit flew,
 Saw other regions, cities new,
 As the world rushed by on either side.
 50 I thought, – All labour, yet no less
 Bear up beneath their unsuccess.
 Look at the end of work, contrast
 The petty done, the undone vast,
 This present of theirs with the hopeful past!
 I hoped she would love me; here we ride.

VI

What hand and brain went ever paired?
 What heart alike conceived and dared?
 What act proved all its thought had been?
 What will but felt the fleshly screen?
 60 We ride and I see her bosom heave.
 There's many a crown for who can reach.
 Ten lines, a statesman's life in each!
 The flag stuck on a heap of bones,
 A soldier's doing! what atones?
 They scratch his name on the Abbey-stones.
 My riding is better, by their leave.

VII

What does it all mean, poet? Well,
 Your brains beat into rhythm, you tell
 What we felt only; you expressed
 70 You hold things beautiful the best,
 And pace them in rhyme so, side by side.
 'Tis something, nay 'tis much: but then,
 Have you yourself what's best for men?
 Are you – poor, sick, old ere your time –
 Nearer one whit your own sublime
 Than we who never have turned a rhyme?
 Sing, riding's a joy! For me, I ride.

VIII

And you, great sculptor – so, you gave
 A score of years to Art, her slave,
 80 And that's your Venus, whence we turn
 To yonder girl that fords the burn!
 You acquiesce, and shall I repine?
 What, man of music, you grown grey
 With notes and nothing else to say,
 Is this your sole praise from a friend,
 'Greatly his opera's strains intend,
 But in music we know how fashions end!'
 I gave my youth; but we ride, in fine.

IX

Who knows what's fit for us? Had fate
 90 Proposed bliss here should sublimate
 My being – had I signed the bond –
 Still one must lead some life beyond,
 Have a bliss to die with, dim-described.
 This foot once planted on the goal,
 This glory-garland round my soul,
 Could I descry such? Try and test!
 I sink back shuddering from the quest.
 Earth being so good, would heaven seem best?
 Now, heaven and she are beyond this ride.

X

100 And yet – she has not spoke so long!
 What if heaven be that, fair and strong
 At life's best, with our eyes upturned
 Whither life's flower is first discerned,
 We, fixed so, ever should so abide?
 What if we still ride on, we two
 With life for ever old yet new,
 Changed not in kind but in degree,
 The instant made eternity, –
 And heaven just prove that I and she
 110 Ride, ride together, for ever ride?

The Patriot

An Old Story

I

It was roses, roses, all the way,
 With myrtle mixed in my path like mad:
 The house-roofs seemed to heave and sway,
 The church-spires flamed, such flags they had,
 A year ago on this very day.

II

The air broke into a mist with bells,
 The old walls rocked with the crowd and cries.
 Had I said, 'Good folk, mere noise repels –
 But give me your sun from yonder skies!'
 10 They had answered, 'And afterward, what else?'

III

Alack, it was I who leaped at the sun
 To give it my loving friends to keep!
 Naught man could do, have I left undone:
 And you see my harvest, what I reap
 This very day, now a year is run.

HOW IT STRIKES A CONTEMPORARY

First published in *Men and Women* on 10 November 1855; it remained with 'Men and Women'. After 1855 there were several revisions, none of much significance although the allegory was made less obtrusive by reducing the number of capital letters. Date of composition is unknown, but the poem may have been written soon after Browning completed his essay on Shelley late in 1851. For the title, Browning is indebted to 'How It Strikes a Stranger', a story by Jane Taylor (1783-1824) which Browning later used for 'Rephan' (1889); a 'corrégidor de Valladolid' and a house-keeper called Jacinte appear in LeSage's *Le Gil Blas de la Jeunesse*. Carlyle has been suggested as the model for the poem's hero. The poem is one of Browning's most important poetic statements about the nature of his art.

3 *Valladolid* town about 100 miles north-west of Madrid.

12 *old dog* rather like Mrs Browning's Flush.

28 *fly-leaf* broadside; printed on one sheet.

39-44 The lines recall Lear's speech to Cordelia on their way to prison, and especially the reference to 'God's spies' (V. 3.17). On 10 December 1855 Browning wrote to Ruskin: 'A poet's affair is with God, to whom he is accountable, and of whom is his reward.'

48 *tang* sting.

73-7 *his home . . . change his plate* 'there's no denying the deep delight of playing the Eastern Jew's part here in this London - they go about, you know by travel-books, with the tokens of extreme destitution and misery, and steal by blind ways and by-paths to some blank dreary house, one obscure door in it - which being well shut behind them, they grope on through a dark corridor or so, and then, a blaze follows the lifting a curtain or the like, for they are in a palace-hall with fountains and light, and marble and gold, of which the envious are never to dream' (Robert Browning to Elizabeth Barrett, 9 July 1845).

76 *Titians* paintings by Titian, the Venetian artist (c. 1485-1577).

90 *Corregidor* Chief Magistrate.

96 *memorized* memorialized.

115 *Prado* Promenade.

THE LAST RIDE TOGETHER

First published in *Men and Women* on 10 November 1855; in 1863 it was included in 'Romances'. After 1855 there were no verbal revisions. Date of composition is unknown. Possible significances of *ride* have been explored; one commentator fancies that the poem is about sexual intercourse. I. Orenstein associates the lady with the Muse in 'A Fresh Interpretation of "The Last Ride Together"', *Baylor Browning Interests* 18, 1961, 3-10. The poem is one of Browning's most-loved lyrics. J. K. Stephen wrote a celebrated parody in which the lady replies to Mr B.

65 They honour him with burial in Westminster Abbey.

90 *sublimate* refine, exalt.

THE PATRIOT

First published in *Men and Women* on 10 November 1855; it was included in 'Romances' in 1863. Except for the sixth stanza, which was heavily revised, changes

after 1855 were extremely minor. The original title was 'The Old Story' (Huntington proof). Date of composition is unknown, but the poem may belong to the spring of 1849 after the Battle of Novara and the collapse of the Italian struggle for freedom. The 'Old' of the title has the sense of 'Recurring'; no particular story lies behind the poem. On it, see D. J. DeLaura, 'The Religious Imagery in Browning's "The Patriot"', *VNL* 21, 1962, 16-18.

19 *Shambles* slaughter-house.

26 *entered*] entered Brescia 1855. (The change was probably made to avoid the identification, denied by Browning, of his hero with Arnold of Brescia, hanged in 1155.)

30 *repay* :] requit 1855.

MASTER HUGUES OF SAXE-GOTHA

First published in *Men and Women* on 10 November 1855; in 1863 it was included in 'Lyrics'. After 1855 revisions were minor. Date of composition is unknown, but it may well have been 1853. Master Hugues is fictional; his name, despite frequent spellings and pronunciations to the contrary, conveniently rhymes with 'fugues'. Saxe-Gotha, a duchy in central Germany, was near the birthplace of J. S. Bach (1685-1750), but Browning in a letter of 30 June 1887 said that his composer of fugues was not 'meant for the glorious Bach' but for 'one of the dry-as-dust imitators who would elaborate . . . [a trifling subject] for a dozen pages altogether' (see H. E. Green, 'Browning's Knowledge of Music', *PMLA* LXII, 1947, 1095-9). A fugue is a composition in which a 'subject' is introduced, repeated, and complexly developed. In 1886 Browning, who himself played the organ, said 'that he had no allegorical intent in his head when he wrote the poem; that it was composed in an organ-loft and was merely the expression of a fugue - the construction of which he understood . . . because he had composed fugues himself: it was an involved labyrinth of entanglement *leading to nothing* - the only allegory in it was the possible reflection of the labyrinth of human life. That was all . . .' (L. C. Collins, *Life and Memoirs of J. C. Collins*, 1912). On the poem see R. D. Altick, 'The Symbolism of Browning's "Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha"', *VP* III, 1965, 1-7.

16 *house of the sounds* organ.

26 *Aloys and Jurien and Just* presumably the Church's saints.

29 *sacrament-lace* the lace of the altar-cloth.

35 *helve* handle.

39 *claviers* keyboards.

42 *ruled like a score* furrowed as with horizontal lines on a musical score.

44 *breves* double long notes used to be written as solid black rectangles.

45 *bar* vertical line at the end of a bar.

48 *Company's votes* the ones that made Hugues church organist.

49 *sciolists shent* people with superficial knowledge shamed.

52 *snuff* charred part of a wick.

56 *phrase* 'subject' of the fugue.

57 *propound* The *proposta* is the 'subject'.

60 *Two* The 'subject' is answered by the second 'voice'. This fugue is a 'five-voiced' one.

67 *discept* disagree.

73 *vociferance* clamour.