

Thomas Hood (1799-1845)

10 *John Jones*

A Pathetic Ballad

'I saw the iron enter into his soul.' — *Sterne*.

John Jones he was a builder's clerk,
On ninety pounds a year,
Before his head was engine-turn'd
To be an engineer!

For, finding that the iron roads 5
Were quite the public tale,
Like Robin Redbreast, all his heart
Was set upon a rail.

But oh! his schemes all ended ill,
As schemes must come to nought 10
With men who try to make short cuts
When cut with something short.

His altitudes he did not take
Like any other elf;
But first a spirit-level took 15
That levell'd him himself.

Then getting up, from left to right
So many tacks he made,
The ground he meant to go upon
Got very well survey'd. 20

How crows may fly he did not care
A single fig to know; —
He wish'd to make an iron road,
And not an iron crow:

So, going to the Rose and Crown 25
To cut his studies short,
The nearest way from *pint* to *pint*,

He found was through a quart.

According to this rule he plann'd
His railway o'er a cup; 30
But when he came to lay it down,
No soul would take it up!

Alas! not his the wily arts
Of men as shrewd as rats,
Who out of one sole *level* make 35
A precious lot of *flats!*

In vain from Z to crooked S
His devious line he show'd;
Directors even seemed to wish
For some directer road. 40

The writers of the public press
All sneered at his design;
And penny-a-liners wouldn't give
A penny for his line!

Yet still he urged his darling scheme 45
In spite of all the fates;
Until at last his zigzag ways
Quite brought him into *straits*.

His money gone, of course he sank
In debt from day to day — 50
His way would not pay *him*, and so
He could not pay his way.

Said he, 'All parties run me down, —
How bitter is my cup!
My landlord is the only man 55
That ever runs me up!

'And he begins to talk of scores,
And will not draw a cork'; —
And then he rail'd at Fortune, since
He could not rail at York! 60

The morrow, in a fatal noose
They found him hanging fast;
This sentence scribbled on the wall, —
‘I’ve got my line at last!’

Twelve men upon the body sate, 65
And thus, on oath, did say,
‘We find he got his *gruel*’cause
He couldn’t have his way!’

1837

(From *The Complete Poetical Works of Thomas Hood*.
Ed. with Notes by Walter Jerrold. Oxford UP, 1911)