

John Davidson (1857-1909)

11 *Thirty Bob a Week*

I couldn't touch a stop and turn a screw,  
And set the blooming world a-work for me,  
Like such as cut their teeth—I hope, like you—  
On the handle of a skeleton gold key;  
I cut mine on a leek, which I eat it every week: 5  
I'm a clerk at thirty bob as you can see.

But I don't allow it's luck and all a toss;  
There's no such thing as being starred and crossed;  
It's just the power of some to be a boss,  
And the bally power of others to be bossed: 10  
I face the music, sir; you bet I ain't a cur;  
Strike me lucky if I don't believe I'm lost!

For like a mole I journey in the dark,  
A-travelling along the underground  
From my Pillar'd Halls and broad Suburban Park, 15  
To come the daily dull official round;  
And home again at night with my pipe all alight,  
A-scheming how to count ten bob a pound.

And it's often very cold and very wet,  
And my missis stitches towels for a hunks; 20  
And the Pillar'd Halls is half of it to let—  
Three rooms about the size of travelling trunks.  
And we cough, my wife and I, to dislocate a sigh,  
When the noisy little kids are in their bunks.

But you never hear her do a growl or whine, 25  
For she's made of flint and roses, very odd;

And I've got to cut my meaning rather fine,  
Or I'd blubber, for I'm made of greens and sod:  
So p'r'aps we are in Hell for all that I can tell,  
And lost and damn'd and served up hot to God. 30

I ain't blaspheming, Mr. Silver-tongue;  
I'm saying things a bit beyond your art:  
Of all the rummy starts you ever sprung,  
Thirty bob a week's the rummiest start!  
With your science and your books and your the'ries 35  
about spooks,  
Did you ever hear of lookng in your heart?

I didn't mean your pocket, Mr., no:  
I mean that having children and a wife,  
With thirty bob on which to come and go,  
Isn't dancing to the tabor and the fife: 40  
When it doesn't make you drink, by Heaven! it makes  
you think,  
And notice curious items about life.

I step into my heart and there I meet  
A god-almighty devil singing small,  
Who would like to shout and whistle in the street, 45  
And squelch the passers flat against the wall;  
If the whole world was a cake he had the power to take,  
He would take it, ask for more, and eat them all.

And I meet a sort of simpleton beside,  
The kind that life is always giving beans; 50  
With thirty bob a week to keep a bride  
He fell in love and married in his teens:  
At thirty bob he stuck; but he knows it isn't luck:  
He knows the seas are deeper than tureens.



And the god-almighty devil and the fool 55

That meet me in the High Street on the strike,  
When I walk about my heart a-gathering wool,  
Are my good and evil angels if you like.

And both of them together in every kind of weather  
Ride me like a double-seated bike. 60

That's rough a bit and needs its meaning curled.

But I have a high old hot un in my mind—  
A most engrugious notion of the world,  
That leaves your lightning 'rithmetic behind:  
I give it at a glance when I say 'There ain't no chance, 65  
Nor nothing of the lucky-lottery kind.'

And it's this way that I make it out to be:

No fathers, mothers, countries, climates—none;  
No Adam was responsible for me,  
Nor society, nor systems, nary one: 70  
A little sleeping seed, I woke—I did, indeed—  
A million years before the blooming sun.

I woke because I thought the time had come;

Beyond my will there was no other cause;  
And everywhere I found myself at home, 75  
Because I chose to be the thing I was;  
And in whatever shape of mollusc or of ape  
I always went according to the laws.

I was the love that chose my mother out;

I joined two lives and from the union burst; 80  
My weakness and my strength without a doubt  
Are mine alone for ever from the first:  
It's just the very same with a difference in the name  
As 'Thy will be done.' You say it if you durst!

They say it daily up and down the land 85  
As easy as you take a drink, it's true;  
But the difficultest go to understand,  
And the difficultest job a man can do,  
Is to come it brave and meek with thirty bob a week,  
And feel that that's the proper thing for you. 90

It's a naked child against a hungry wolf;  
It's playing bowls upon a splitting wreck;  
It's walking on a string across a gulf  
With millstones fore-and-aft about your neck;  
But the thing is daily done by many and many a one; 95  
And we fall, face forward, fighting, on the deck.

*1894*

(From *The Poems of John Davidson*. 2 vols. Ed. Andrew  
Turnbull. Edinburgh: Scottish Academic P, 1973)