Classic Poetry Series

John Davidson

- 15 poems -

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John Davidson (11 April 1857 – 23 March 1909)

John Davidson was a Scottish poet, playwright and novelist, best known for his ballads. He also did translations from French and German. In 1909, financial difficulties, as well as physical and mental health problems, led to his suicide.

Life and Works

Scotland

He was born at Barrhead, East Renfrewshire as the son of Alexander Davidson, an Evangelical Union minister and Helen née Crockett of Elgin. His family removed to Greenock in 1862 where he was educated at Highlanders' Academy there and entered the chemical laboratory of Walker's Sugarhouse refinery in his 13th year, returning after one year to school as a pupil teacher. In Public Analysts' Office, 1870-71. In these employments he developed an interest in science which became an important characteristic of his poetry. In 1872 he returned for four years to the Highlanders' Academy as a pupil-teacher, and, after a year at Edinburgh University (1876-7), received in 1877 his first scholastic employment at Alexander's Charity, Glasgow. During the next six years he held positions in the following schools : Perth Academy (1878–81), Kelvinside Academy, Glasgow (1881-2), and Hutchinson's Charity, Paisley (1883-4). He varied his career by spending a year as clerk in a Glasgow thread firm (1884-5), and subsequently taught in Morrison's Academy, Crieff (1885-8), and in a private school at Greenock (1888-9). Married 1885.

London

Having taken to literature, he went in 1889 to London where he frequented 'Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese' and joined the 'Rhymers' Club'. Davidson's first published work was Bruce, a chronicle play in the Elizabethan manner, which appeared with a Glasgow imprint in 1886. Four other plays, Smith, a Tragic Farce (1888), An Unhistorical Pastoral (1889), Aromantic Farce (1889), and the brilliant pantomimic Scaramouch in Naxos (1889) were also published while he was in Scotland.
Besides writing for the Speaker, the Glasgow Herald, and other papers, he produced several novels and tales, of which the best was Perfervid (1890). But these prose works were written for a livelihood.

Verse

Davidson's true medium was verse. In a Music Hall and other Poems (1891) suggested what Fleet Street Eclogues (1893) proved, that Davidson

possessed a genuine and distinctive poetic gift. Yeats had words of praise for In a Music Hall. He called it, "An example of a new writer seeking out 'new subject matter, new emotions'". Yeats's wrote of his emotional dispute with Davidson in Autobiographies (1955). The second collection established his reputation among the discerning few. His early plays were republished in one volume in 1894, and henceforward he turned his attention more and more completely to verse. A volume of vigorous Ballads and Songs (1894), his most popular work, was followed in turn by a second series of Fleet Street Eclogues (1896) and by New Ballads (1897) and The Last Ballad (1899).

Dramatic works

For a time he abandoned lyric for the drama, writing several original plays.

Finally Davidson engaged on a series of "Testaments", in which he gave definite expression to his philosophy. These volumes were entitled The Testament of a Vivisector (1901),The Testament of a Man Forbid (1901), The Testament of an Empire Builder (1902), and The Testament of John Davidson (1908). Though he disclaimed the title of philosopher, he expounded an original philosophy which was at once materialistic and aristocratic. The cosmic process, as interpreted by evolution, was for him a fruitful source of inspiration.

His later verse, which is often fine rhetoric rather than poetry, expressed the belief which is summed up in the last words that he wrote, "Men are the universe become conscious; the simplest man should consider himself too great to be called after any name." The corollary was that every man was to be himself to the utmost of his power, and the strongest was to rule. Davidson professed to reject all existing philosophies, including that of Nietzsche, as inadequate, but Nietzsche's influence is traceable in his argument. The poet planned ultimately to embody his revolutionary creed in a trilogy entitled God and Mammon. Only two plays, however, were written, The Triumph of Mammon (1907) and Mammon and his Message (1908).

Family

In 1885 Davidson married Margaret, daughter of John McArthur of Perth. She survived him with two sons, Alexander (b. 1887) and Menzies (b. 1889).

Other Works

Davidson was a prolific writer. Besides the works cited, he wrote many other works including, The Wonderful Mission of Earl Lavender (1895), a novel which included flagellation erotica and contributed an introduction to Shakespeare's Sonnets (Renaissance edition, 1908), which, like his various prefaces and essays, shows him a subtle literary critic.

Translations

He translated Montesquieu's Lettres Persanes (1892), François Coppée's Pour la Couronne in 1896 and Victor Hugo's Ruy Blas in 1904, the former being produced as, For the Crown, at the Lyceum Theatre in 1896, the latter as A Queen's Romance at the Imperial Theatre.

Portraits

Davidson's portrait was drawn by Walter Sickert and by Robert Bryden. A caricature by Max Beerbohm appeared in The Chapbook, (1907), and William Rothenstein did a portrait of him for The Yellow Book. In Men and Memories (1931), Rothenstein said that when Max Beerbohm looked at his pictures of Davidson, he had complimented him on the 'subtle way he had handled his toupée'. Rothenstein wrote that he had not noticed tht he was wearing one.

Frank Harris, a member of the Rhymers' Club described him in 1889 thus: "... a little below middle height, but strongly built with square shoulders and remarkably fine face and head; the features were almost clasically regular, the eyes dark brown and large, the forehead high, the hair and moustache

black. His manners were perfectly frank and natural; he met everyone in the same unaffected kindly human way; I never saw a trace in him of snobbishness or incivility. Possibly a great man, I said to myself, certainly a man of genius, for simplicity of manner alone is in England almost a proof of extraordinary endowment."

Drowning

In 1906 he was awarded a civil list pension of £100 per annum and George Bernard Shaw did what he could to help him financially, but poverty, ill-health, and his declining powers, exacerbated by the onset of cancer, caused profound hopelessness and clinical depression. Late in 1908, Davidson left London to reside at Penzance. On 23 March 1909, he disappeared from his house there, under circumstances which left little doubt that he had drowned himself. Among his papers was found the manuscript of a new work, Fleet Street Poems, with a letter containing the words, "This will be my last book." His body, which was discovered by some fishermen in Mount's Bay on 18 September, was, in accordance with his known wishes, buried at sea. In his will he desired that no biography should be written, none of his unpublished works published, and "no word except of my writing is ever to appear in any book of mine as long as the copyright endures." The assumption that he took his own life is consistent with what is known of his temperament and his ideas. In The Testament of John Davidson, published the year before his death, he anticipates this fate:

"None should outlive his power. . . . Who kills
Himself subdues the conqueror of kings;
Exempt from death is he who takes his life;
My time has come."

Influence on other poets

Davidson's poetry was a key early influence on important Modernist poets, in particular, his compatriot Hugh MacDiarmid and Wallace Stevens. T.S. Eliot, who was especially fond of the poem 'Thirty Bob a Week' (In Ballads and Songs (1894)). Davidon's poem "In the Isle of Dogs", for example, is a clear intertext of later poems such as Eliot's "The Wasteland" and Stevens' "The Idea of Order at Key West".

Quotes

"This is an age of Bovril"

Works:

The North Wall (1885)
Diabolus Amans (1885), verse drama
Bruce (1886) a drama in five acts
Smith (1888) a tragedy
Plays (1889)
An Unhistorical Pastoral, a Romantic Farce
Scaramouch in Naxos
Perfervid: The Career of Ninian Jamieson, (1890) with 23 Original Illustrations by Harry Furniss, Ward & Downey, Ltd., London.
The Great Men, And a Practical Novelist (1891) Illustrated by E. J. Ellis. Ward & Downey, Ltd., London.
In a Music Hall, and other Poems (1891) Ward & Downey, Ltd., London.
Laura Ruthven's Widowhood (with C. J. Wills), (1892)
Fleet Street Eclogues (1893)
The Knight of the Maypole, (1903)
Sentences and Paragraphs (1893)
Ballads and Songs (1894) John Lane Publishers, London

Baptist Lake (1894) Ward & Downey, Ltd., London.
A Random Itinerary (1894)
A Full and True Account of the Wonderful Mission of Earl Lavender (1895)
St. George's Day (1895)
Fleet Street Eclogues (Second Series) (1896)
Miss Armstrong's and Other Circumstances (1896)
The Pilgrimage of Strongsoul and Other Stories (1896)
New Ballads (1897)
Godfrida, a play (1898)
The Last Ballad (1899)
Self's the Man, a tragi-comedy, (1901)
The Testament of a Man Forbid (1901)
The Testament of a Vivisector (1901)
The Testament of an Empire Builder (1902)
A Rosary, (1903) Grant Richards, London
The Knight of the Maypole: A Comedy in Four Acts (1903)
The Testament of a Prime Minister (1904)
The Ballad of a Nun (1905)
The Theatrocrat: a Tragic Play of Church and State, (1905)
Holiday and other poems, with a note on poetry (1906)
The Triumph of Mammon (1907) E.G. Richards, London
Mammon and His Message (1908)
The Testament of John Davidson (1908)
Fleet Street and other Poems, (1909)
Contributor to The Yellow Book

Translated

Montesquieu's Lettres Persanes, (Persian Letters) (1892)
François Coppée's Pour la couronne, (For the Crown) (1896)
Victor Hugo's Ruy Blas, (A Queen's Romance) (1904)

A Ballad of Hell

'A letter from my love to-day!
Oh, unexpected, dear appeal!'
She struck a happy tear away,
And broke the crimson seal.

'My love, there is no help on earth,
No help in heaven; the dead-man's bell
Must toll our wedding; our first hearth
Must be the well-paved floor of hell.'

The colour died from out her face,
Her eyes like ghostly candles shone;
She cast dread looks about the place,
Then clenched her teeth and read right on.

'I may not pass the prison door;
Here must I rot from day to day,
Unless I wed whom I abhor,
My cousin, Blanche of Valencay.

'At midnight with my dagger keen,
I'll take my life; it must be so.
Meet me in hell to-night, my queen,
For weal and woe.'

She laughed although her face was wan,
She girded on her golden belt,
She took her jewelled ivory fan,
And at her glowing missal knelt.

Then rose, 'And am I mad?' she said:
She broke her fan, her belt untied;
With leather girt herself instead,
And stuck a dagger at her side.

She waited, shuddering in her room,
Till sleep had fallen on all the house.
She never flinched; she faced her doom:
They two must sin to keep their vows.

Then out into the night she went,
And, stooping, crept by hedge and tree;
Her rose-bush flung a snare of scent,
And caught a happy memory.

She fell, and lay a minute's space;
She tore the sward in her distress;
The dewy grass refreshed her face;
She rose and ran with lifted dress.

She started like a morn-caught ghost
Once when the moon came out and stood

To watch; the naked road she crossed,
And dived into the murmuring wood.

The branches snatched her streaming cloak;
A live thing shrieked; she made no stay!
She hurried to the trysting-oak—
Right well she knew the way.

Without a pause she bared her breast,
And drove her dagger home and fell,
And lay like one that takes her rest,
And died and wakened up in hell.

She bathed her spirit in the flame,
And near the centre took her post;
From all sides to her ears there came
The dreary anguish of the lost.

The devil started at her side,
Comely, and tall, and black as jet.
'I am young Malespina's bride;
Has he come hither yet?'

'My poppet, welcome to your bed.'
'Is Malespina here?'
'Not he! To-morrow he must wed
His cousin Blanche, my dear!'

'You lie, he died with me to-night.'
'Not he! it was a plot' ... 'You lie.'
'My dear, I never lie outright.'
'We died at midnight, he and I.'

The devil went. Without a groan
She, gathered up in one fierce prayer,
Took root in hell's midst all alone,
And waited for him there.

She dared to make herself at home
Amidst the wail, the uneasy stir.
The blood-stained flame that filled the dome,
Scentless and silent, shrouded her.

How long she stayed I cannot tell;
But when she felt his perfidy,
She marched across the floor of hell;
And all the damned stood up to see.

The devil stopped her at the brink:
She shook him off; she cried, 'Away!'
'My dear, you have gone mad, I think.'
'I was betrayed: I will not stay.'

Across the weltering deep she ran;
A stranger thing was never seen:
The damned stood silent to a man;
They saw the great gulf set between.

To her it seemed a meadow fair;
And flowers sprang up about her feet
She entered heaven; she climbed the stair
And knelt down at the mercy-seat.

Seraphs and saints with one great voice
Welcomed that soul that knew not fear.
Amazed to find it could rejoice,
Hell raised a hoarse, half-human cheer.

John Davidson

A Cinque Port

Below the down the stranded town
What may betide forlornly waits,
With memories of smoky skies,
When Gallic navies crossed the straits;
When waves with fire and blood grew bright,
And cannon thundered through the night.

With swinging stride the rhythmic tide
Bore to the harbour barque and sloop;
Across the bar the ship of war,
In castled stern and lanterned poop,
Came up with conquests on her lee,
The stately mistress of the sea.

Where argosies have wooed the breeze,
The simple sheep are feeding now;
And near and far across the bar
The ploughman whistles at the plough;
Where once the long waves washed the shore,
Larks from their lowly lodgings soar.

Below the down the stranded town
Hears far away the rollers beat;
About the wall the seabirds call;
The salt wind murmurs through the street;
Forlorn the sea's forsaken bride
Awaits the end that shall betide.

John Davidson

A Loafer

I hang about the streets all day,
At night I hang about;
I sleep a little when I may,
But rise betimes the morning's scout;
For through the year I always hear
Afar, aloft, a ghostly shout.

My clothes are worn to threads and loops;
My skin shows here and there ;
About my face like seaweed droops
My tangled beard, my tangled hair;
From cavernous and shaggy brows
My stony eyes untroubled stare.

I move from eastern wretchedness
Through Fleet Street and the Strand;
And as the pleasant people press
I touch them softly with my hand,
Perhaps I know that still I go
Alive about a living land.

For far in front the clouds are riven
I hear the ghostly cry,
As if a still voice fell from heaven
To where sea-whelmed the drowned folk lie
In sepulchres no tempest stirs
And only eyeless things pass by.

In Piccadilly spirits pass:
Oh, eyes and cheeks that glow!
Oh, strength and comeliness! Alas,
The lustrous health is earth I know
From shrinking eyes that recognise
No brother in my rags and woe.

I know no handicraft, no art,
But I have conquered fate;
For I have chosen the better part,
And neither hope, nor fear, nor hate.
With placid breath on pain and death,
My certain alms, alone I wait.

And daily, nightly comes the call,
The pale unechoing note,
The faint "Aha!" sent from the wall
Of heaven, but from no ruddy throat
Of human breed or seraph's seed,
A phantom voice that cries by rote.

John Davidson

A Northern Suburb

Nature selects the longest way,
☐And winds about in tortuous grooves;
A thousand years the oaks decay;
☐The wrinkled glacier hardly moves.

But here the whetted fangs of change
☐Daily devour the old demesne –
The busy farm, the quiet grange,
☐The wayside inn, the village green.

In gaudy yellow brick and red,
☐With rooting pipes, like creepers rank,
The shoddy terraces o'erspread
☐Meadow, and garth, and daisied bank.

With shelves for rooms the houses crowd,
☐Like draughty cupboards in a row –
Ice-chests when wintry winds are loud,
☐Ovens when summer breezes blow.

Roused by the fee'd policeman's knock,
☐And sad that day should come again,
Under the stars the workmen flock
☐In haste to reach the workmen's train.

For here dwell those who must fulfil
☐Dull tasks in uncongenial spheres,
Who toil through dread of coming ill,
☐And not with hope of happier years –

The lowly folk who scarcely dare
☐Conceive themselves perhaps misplaced,
Whose prize for unremitting care
☐Is only not to be disgraced

John Davidson

A Runnable Stag

When the pods went pop on the broom, green broom,
And apples began to be golden-skinn'd,
We harbour'd a stag in the Priory coomb,
And we feather'd his trail up-wind, up-wind,
We feather'd his trail up-wind-
A stag of warrant, a stag, a stag,
A runnable stag, a kingly crop,
Brow, bay and tray and three on top,
A stag, a runnable stag.

Then the huntsman's horn rang yap, yap yap,
And 'Forwards' we heard the harbourer shout;
But 'twas only a brocket that broke a gap
In the beechen underwood, driven out,
From the underwood antler'd out
By warrant and might of the stag, the stag,
The runnable stag, whose lordly mind
Was bent on sleep though beam'd and tined
He stood, a runnable stag

So we tufted the covert till afternoon
With Tinkerman's Pup and Bell- of-the-North;
And hunters were sulky and hounds out of tune
Before we tufted the right stag forth,
Before we tufted him forth,
The stag of warrant, the wily stag,
The runnable stag with his kingly crop,
Brow, bay and tray and three on top,
The royal and runnable stag.

It was Bell-of-the-North and Tinkerman's Pup
That stuck to the scent till the copse was drawn.
'Tally ho! tally ho!' and the hunt was up,
The tufters whipp'd and the pack laid on,
The resolute pack laid on,
And the stag of warrant away at last,
The runnable stag, the same, the same,
His hoofs on fire, his horns like flame,
A stag, a runnable stag.

'Let your gelding be: if you check or chide
He stumbles at once and you're out of the hunt
For three hundred gentlemen, able to ride,
On hunters accustom'd to bear the brunt,
Accustom'd to bear the brunt,
Are after the runnable stag, the stag,
The runnable stag with his kingly crop,
Brow, bay and tray and three on top,
The right, the runnable stag.

By perilous paths in coomb and dell,
The heather, the rocks, and the river-bed,

The pace grew hot, for the scent lay well,
And a runnable stag goes right ahead,
The quarry went right ahead--
Ahead, ahead, and fast and far;
His antler'd crest, his cloven hoof,
Brow, bay and tray and three aloof,
The stag, the runnable stag.

For a matter of twenty miles and more,
By the densest hedge and the highest wall,
Through herds of bullocks lie baffled the lore
Of harbourer, huntsman, hounds and all,
Of harbourer, hounds and all
The stag of warrant, the wily stag,
For twenty miles, and five and five,
He ran, and he never was caught alive,
This stag, this runnable stag.

When he turn'd at bay in the leafy gloom,
In the emerald gloom where the brook ran deep
He heard in the distance the rollers boom,
And he saw In a vision of peaceful sleep
In a wonderful vision of sleep,
A stag of warrant, a stag, a stag,
A runnable stag in a jewell'd bed,
Under the sheltering ocean dead,
A stag, a runnable stag.

So a fateful hope lit up his eye,
And he open'd his nostrils wide again,
And he toss'd his branching antlers high
As he headed the hunt down the Charlock glen,
As he raced down the echoing glen
For five miles more, the stag, the stag,
For twenty miles, and five and five,
Not to be caught now, dead or alive,
The stag, the runnable stag.

Three hundred gentleman, able to ride,
Three hundred horses as gallant and free,
Beheld him escape on the evening tide,
Far out till he sank in the Severn Sea,
Till he sank in the depths of the sea
The stag, the buoyant stag, the stag
That slept at last in a jewell'd bed
Under the sheltering ocean spread,
The stag, the runnable stag.

John Davidson

Battle

The war of words is done;
The red-lipped cannon speak;
The battle has begun.

The web your speeches spun
Tears and blood shall streak;
The war of words is done.

Smoke enshrouds the sun;
Earth staggers at the shriek
Of battle new begun.

Poltroons and braggarts run:
Woe to the poor, the meek!
The war of words is done.

"And hope not now to shun
The doom that dogs the weak,"
Thunders every gun;

"Victory must be won."
When the red-lipped cannon speak,
The war of words is done,
The slaughter has begun.

John Davidson

Imagination

There is a dish to hold the sea,
A brazier to contain the sun,
A compass for the galaxy,
A voice to wake the dead and done!

That minister of ministers,
Imagination, gathers up
The undiscovered Universe,
Like jewels in a jasper cup.

Its flame can mingle north and south;
Its accent with the thunder strive;
The ruddy sentence of its mouth
Can make the ancient dead alive.

The mart of power, the fount of will,
The form and mould of every star,
The source and bound of good and ill,
The key of all the things that are,

Imagination, new and strange
In every age, can turn the year;
Can shift the poles and lightly change
The mood of men, the world's career.

John Davidson

In Romney Marsh

As I went down to Dymchurch Wall,
I heard the South sing o'er the land
I saw the yellow sunlight fall
On knolls where Norman churches stand.

And ringing shrilly, taut and lithe,
Within the wind a core of sound,
The wire from Romney town to Hythe
Along its airy journey wound.

A veil of purple vapour flowed
And trailed its fringe along the Straits;
The upper air like sapphire glowed:
And roses filled Heaven's central gates.

Masts in the offing wagged their tops;
The swinging waves pealed on the shore;
The saffron beach, all diamond drops
And beads of surge, prolonged the roar.

As I came up from Dymchurch Wall,
I saw above the Downs' low crest
The crimson brands of sunset fall,
Flicker and fade from out the West.

Night sank: like flakes of silver fire
The stars in one great shower came down;
Shrill blew the wind; and shrill the wire
Rang out from Hythe to Romney town.

The darkly shining salt sea drops
Streamed as the waves clashed on the shore;
The beach, with all its organ stops
Pealing again, prolonged the roar.

John Davidson

London

Athwart the sky a lowly sigh
From west to east the sweet wind carried;
The sun stood still on Primrose Hill;
His light in all the city tarried:
The clouds on viewless columns bloomed
Like smouldering lilies unconsumed.

'Oh sweetheart, see! how shadowy,
Of some occult magician's rearing,
Or swung in space of heaven's grace
Dissolving, dimly reappearing,
Afloat upon ethereal tides
St. Paul's above the city rides!'

A rumour broke through the thin smoke
Enwreathing abbey, tower, and palace,
The parks, the squares, the thoroughfares,
The million-peopled lanes and alleys,
An ever-muttering prisoned storm,
The heart of London beating warm.

John Davidson

Snow

'Who affirms that crystals are alive?'
I affirm it, let who will deny:
Crystals are engendered, wax and thrive,
Wane and wither; I have seen them die.

Trust me, masters, crystals have their day,
Eager to attain the perfect norm,
Lit with purpose, potent to display
Facet, angle, colour, beauty, form.

Water-crystals need for flower and root
Sixty clear degrees, no less, no more;
Snow, so fickle, still in this acute
Angle thinks, and learns no other lore:

Such its life, and such its pleasure is,
Such its art and traffic, such its gain,
Evermore in new conjunctions this
Admirable angle to maintain.

Crystalcraft in every flower and flake
Snow exhibits, of the welkin free:
Crystalline are crystals for the sake,
All and singular, of crystalry.

Yet does every crystal of the snow
Individualize, a seedling sown
Broadcast, but instinct with power to grow
Beautiful in beauty of its own.

Every flake with all its prongs and dints
Burns ecstatic as a new-lit star:
Men are not more diverse, finger prints
More dissimilar than snow-flakes are.

Worlds of men and snow endure, increase,
Woven of power and passion to defy
Time and travail: only races cease,
Individual men and crystals die.

John Davidson

Song

THE boat is chafing at our long delay,
   And we must leave too soon
The spicy sea-pinks and the inborne spray,
   The tawny sands, the moon.

Keep us, O Thetis, in our western flight!
   Watch from thy pearly throne
Our vessel, plunging deeper into night
   To reach a land unknown.

John Davidson

Song of a Train

A monster taught
To come to hand
Amain,
As swift as thought
Across the land
The train.

The song it sings
Has an iron sound;
Its iron wings
Like wheels go round.

Crash under bridges,
Flash over ridges,
And vault the downs;
The road is straight --
Nor stile, nor gate;
For milestones -- towns!

Voluminous, vanishing, white,
The steam plume trails;
Parallel streaks of light,
THe polished rails.

Oh, who can follow?
The little swallow,
The trout of the sky:
But the sun
Is outrun,
And Time passed by.

O'er bosky dens,
By marsh and mead,
Forest and fens
Embodied speed
Is clanked and hurled;
O'er rivers and runnels;
And into the earth
And out again
In death and birth
That know no pain,
For the whole round world
Is a warren of railway tunnels.

Hark! hark! hark!
It screams and cleaves the dark;
And the subterranean night
Is gilt with smoky light.
Then out again apace
It runs its thundering race,
The monster taught
To come to hand

Amain,
That swift as thought
Speeds through the land
The train.

John Davidson

The Last Rose

'O WHICH is the last rose?'
A blossom of no name.
At midnight the snow came;
At daybreak a vast rose,
In darkness unfurl'd,
O'er-petall'd the world.

Its odourless pallor
Blossom'd forlorn,
Till radiant valour
Establish'd the morn--
Till the night
Was undone
In her fight
With the sun.

The brave orb in state rose,
And crimson he shone first;
While from the high vine
Of heaven the dawn burst,
Staining the great rose
From sky-line to sky-line.

The red rose of morn
A white rose at noon turn'd;
But at sunset reborn
All red again soon burn'd.
Then the pale rose of noonday
Rebloom'd in the night,
And spectrally white
   In the light
Of the moon lay.

But the vast rose
   Was scentless,
And this is the reason:
When the blast rose
   Relentless,
And brought in due season
The snow rose, the last rose
Congeal'd in its breath,
Then came with it treason;
The traitor was Death.

In lee-valleys crowded,
The sheep and the birds
Were frozen and shrouded
In flights and in herds.
In highways
And byways
The young and the old
Were tortured and madden'd

And kill'd by the cold.
But many were gladden'd
By the beautiful last rose,
The blossom of no name
That came when the snow came,
In darkness unfurl'd--
The wonderful vast rose
That fill'd all the world.

John Davidson

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:
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:
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 Suburbean Park,
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 missus stitches towels for a hunks;
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,
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'haps we are in Hell for all that I can tell,
And lost and damn'd and served up hot to God.

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 about spooks,
Did you ever hear of looking 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:
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,

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;
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
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.

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,
Nor nothing of the lucky-lottery kind.'

And it's this way that I make it out to be:
No fathers, mothers, countres, climates -- none;
Not Adam was responsible for me,
Nor society, nor systems, nary one:
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,
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;
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
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.

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;
And we fall, face forward, fighting, on the deck.

John Davidson

War Song

In anguish we uplift
A new unhallowed song:
The race is to the swift;
The battle to the strong.

Of old it was ordained
That we, in packs like curs,
Some thirty million trained
And licensed murderers,

In crime should live and act,
If cunning folk say sooth
Who flay the naked fact
And carve the heart of truth.

The rulers cry aloud,
"We cannot cancel war,
The end and bloody shroud
Of wrongs the worst abhor,
And order's swaddling band:
Know that relentless strife
Remains by sea and land
The holiest law of life.
From fear in every guise,
From sloth, from lust of pelf,
By war's great sacrifice
The world redeems itself.
War is the source, the theme
Of art; the goal, the bent
And brilliant academe
Of noble sentiment;
The augury, the dawn
Of golden times of grace;
The true catholicon,
And blood-bath of the race."

We thirty million trained
And licensed murderers,
Like zanies rigged, and chained
By drill and scourge and curse
In shackles of despair
We know not how to break --
What do we victims care
For art, what interest take
In things unseen, unheard?
Some diplomat no doubt
Will launch a heedless word,
And lurking war leap out!

We spell-bound armies then,
Huge brutes in dumb distress,
Machines compact of men

Who once had consciences,
Must trample harvests down --
Vineyard, and corn and oil;
Dismantle town by town,
Hamlet and homestead spoil
On each appointed path,
Till lust of havoc light
A blood-red blaze of wrath
In every frenzied sight.

In many a mountain pass,
Or meadow green and fresh,
Mass shall encounter mass
Of shuddering human flesh;
Opposing ordnance roar
Across the swaths of slain,
And blood in torrents pour
In vain -- always in vain,
For war breeds war again!

The shameful dream is past,
The subtle maze untrod:
We recognise at last
That war is not of God.

John Davidson