

William Cowper (1731-1800)

1 *The Diverting History of John Gilpin;*

Showing how he went farther than he intended, and came safe home again.

- 1 John Gilpin was a citizen  
Of credit and renown,  
A train-band captain eke was he  
Of famous London town.
- 2 John Gilpin's spouse said to her dear, 5  
Though wedded we have been  
These twice ten tedious years, yet we  
No holiday have seen.
- 3 To-morrow is our wedding-day,  
And we will then repair 10  
Unto the Bell at Edmonton,  
All in a chaise and pair.
- 4 My sister, and my sister's child,  
Myself and children three,  
Will fill the chaise; so you must ride 15  
On horseback after we.
- 5 He soon replied, I do admire  
Of womankind but one,  
And you are she, my dearest dear,  
Therefore it shall be done. 20
- 6 I am a linen-draper bold,  
As all the world doth know,  
And my good friend the Callender  
Will lend his horse to go.
- 7 Quoth Mistress Gilpin, That's well said; 25  
And for that wine is dear,  
We will be furnish'd with our own,  
Which is both bright and clear.

- 8 John Gilpin kiss'd his loving wife;  
O'erjoy'd was he to find 30  
That, though on pleasure she was bent,  
She had a frugal mind.
- 9 The morning came, the chaise was brought,  
But yet was not allow'd  
To drive up to the door, lest all 35  
Should say that she was proud.
- 10 So three doors off the chaise was stay'd,  
Where they did all get in;  
Six precious souls, and all agog  
To dash through thick and thin. 40
- 11 Smack went the whip, round went the wheels,  
Were never folks so glad;  
The stones did rattle underneath,  
As if Cheapside were mad.
- 12 John Gilpin at his horse's side 45  
Seized fast the flowing mane,  
And up he got, in haste to ride,  
But soon came down again;
- 13 For saddle-tree scarce reach'd had he,  
His journey to begin, 50  
When, turning round his head, he saw  
Three customers come in.
- 14 So down he came; for loss of time,  
Although it grieved him sore,  
Yet loss of pence, full well he knew, 55  
Would trouble him much more.
- 15 'Twas long before the customers  
Were suited to their mind,  
When Betty, screaming, came down stairs,  
"The wine is left behind!" 60



- 16 Good lack! quoth he — yet bring it me,  
My leathern belt likewise,  
In which I bear my trusty sword  
When I do exercise.
- 17 Now Mistress Gilpin (careful soul!) 65  
Had two stone bottles found,  
To hold the liquor that she loved,  
And keep it safe and sound.
- 18 Each bottle had a curling ear,  
Through which the belt he drew, 70  
And hung a bottle on each side,  
To make his balance true.
- 19 Then over all, that he might be  
Equipp'd from top to toe,  
His long red cloak, well brush'd and neat, 75  
He manfully did throw.
- 20 Now see him mounted once again  
Upon his nimble steed,  
Full slowly pacing o'er the stones,  
With caution and good heed! 80
- 21 But, finding soon a smoother road  
Beneath his well-shod feet,  
The snorting beast began to trot,  
Which gall'd him in his seat.
- 22 So, Fair and softly, John he cried, 85  
But John he cried in vain;  
That trot became a gallop soon,  
In spite of curb and rein.
- 23 So stooping down, as needs he must  
Who cannot sit upright, 90  
He grasp'd the mane with both his hands,  
And eke with all his might.
- 24 His horse, who never in that sort

- Had handled been before,  
What thing upon his back had got 95  
Did wonder more and more.
- 25 Away went Gilpin, neck or nought;  
Away went hat and wig;  
He little dreamt, when he set out,  
Of running such a rig. 100
- 26 The wind did blow, the cloak did fly  
Like streamer long and gay,  
Till, loop and button failing both,  
At last it flew away.
- 27 Then might all people well discern 105  
The bottles he had slung;  
A bottle swinging at each side,  
As hath been said or sung.
- 28 The dogs did bark, the children scream'd,  
Up flew the windows all; 110  
And every soul cried out, Well done!  
As loud as he could bawl.
- 29 Away went Gilpin — who but he?  
His fame sooh spread around —  
He carries weight! he rides a race! 115  
'Tis for a thousand pound!
- 30 And still, as fast as he drew near,  
'Twas wonderful to view  
How in a trice the turnpike men  
Their gates wide open threw. 120
- 31 And now, as he went bowing down  
His reeking head full low,  
The bottles twain behind his back  
Were shatter'd at a blow.
- 32 Down ran the wine into the road, 125  
Most piteous to be seen,



- Which made his horse's flanks to smoke  
As they had basted been.
- 33 But still he seem'd to carry weight,  
With leathern girdle braced; 130  
For all might see the bottle-necks  
Still dangling at his waist.
- 34 Thus all through merry Islington  
These gambols he did play,  
And till he came unto the Wash 135  
Of Edmonton so gay.
- 35 And there he threw the wash about  
On both sides of the way,  
Just like unto a trundling mop,  
Or a wild goose at play. 140
- 36 At Edmonton, his loving wife  
From the balcony spied  
Her tender husband, wondering much  
To see how he did ride.
- 37 Stop, stop, John Gilpin! — Here's the house! 145  
They all at once did cry;  
The dinner waits, and we are tired:  
Said Gilpin — So am I!
- 38 But yet his horse was not a whit  
Inclined to tarry there; 150  
For why? — his owner had a house  
Full ten miles off, at Ware.
- 39 So like an arrow swift he flew,  
Shot by an archer strong;  
So did he fly — which brings me to 155  
The middle of my song.
- 40 Away went Gilpin, out of breath,  
And sore against his will,  
Till at his friend the Callender's

- His horse at last stood still. 160
- 41 The Callender, amazed to see  
His neighbour in such trim,  
Laid down his pipe, flew to the gate,  
And thus accosted him: —
- 42 What news? what news? your tidings tell; 165  
Tell me you must and shall —  
Say why bareheaded you are come,  
Or why you come at all.
- 43 Now Gilpin had a pleasant wit,  
And loved a timely joke; 170  
And thus unto the Callender  
In merry guise he spoke:
- 44 I came because your horse would come;  
And, if I well forebode,  
My hat and wig will soon be here, 175  
They are upon the road.
- 45 The Callender, right glad to find  
His friend in merry pin,  
Return'd him not a single word,  
But to the house went in; 180
- 46 Whence straight he came with hat and wig;  
A wig that flow'd behind,  
A hat not much the worse for wear,  
Each comely in its kind.
- 47 He held them up, and, in his turn, 185  
Thus show'd his ready wit, —  
My head is twice as big as yours  
They therefore needs must fit.
- 48 But let me scrape the dirt away  
That hangs upon your face; 190  
And stop and eat, for well you may  
Be in a hungry case.



- 49 Said John, It is my wedding-day,  
And all the world would stare,  
If wife should dine at Edmonton, 195  
And I should dine at Ware.
- 50 So turning to his horse, he said,  
I am in haste to dine;  
'Twas for your pleasure you came here,  
You shall go back for mine. 200
- 51 Ah, luckless speech, and bootless boast!  
For which he paid full dear;  
For while he spake, a braying ass  
Did sing most loud and clear;
- 52 Whereat his horse did snort as he 205  
Had heard a lion roar,  
And gallopp'd off with all his might,  
As he had done before.
- 53 Away went Gilpin, and away  
Went Gilpin's hat and wig; 210  
He lost them sooner than at first,  
For why? — they were too big.
- 54 Now, Mistress Gilpin, when she saw  
Her husband posting down  
Into the country far away, 215  
She pull'd out half-a-crown.
- 55 And thus unto the youth she said,  
That drove them to the Bell,  
This shall be yours when you bring back  
My husband safe and well. 220
- 56 The youth did ride, and soon did meet  
John coming back amain,  
Whom in a trice he tried to stop  
By catching at his rein;

- 57 But, not performing what he meant, 225  
And gladly would have done,  
The frightened steed he frightened more,  
And made him faster run.
- 58 Away went Gilpin, and away 230  
Went postboy at his heels,  
The postboy's horse right glad to miss  
The lumbering of the wheels.
- 59 Six gentlemen upon the road  
Thus seeing Gilpin fly,  
With postboy scampering in the rear, 235  
They raised the hue and cry:
- 60 Stop thief! stop thief! — a highwayman!  
Not one of them was mute;  
And all and each that pass'd that way  
Did join in the pursuit. 240
- 61 And now the turnpike gates again  
Flew open in short space,  
The tollmen thinking, as before,  
That Gilpin rode a race.
- 62 And so he did, and won it too, 245  
For he got first to town;  
Nor stopp'd till where he had got up  
He did again get down.
- 63 Now let us sing, Long live the king,  
And Gilpin, long live he; 250  
And when he next doth ride abroad,  
May I be there to see!

1782

(From *The Poetical Works of William Cowper*. With Life, Critical Dissertation, and Explanatory Notes, by the Rev. George Gilfillan. Vol. 1. Edinburgh, 1854)