

William Wordsworth (1770-1850)

8 *The Idiot Boy*

'Tis eight o'clock, — a clear March night,
The moon is up — the sky is blue,
The owlet in the moonlight air,
He shouts from nobody knows where;
He lengthens out his lonely shout, 5
Halloo! halloo! a long halloo!

— Why bustle thus about your door,
What means this bustle, Betty Foy?
Why are you in this mighty fret?
And why on horseback have you set 10
Him whom you love, your idiot boy?

Beneath the moon that shines so bright,
Till she is tired, let Betty Foy
With girt and stirrup fiddle-faddle;
But wherefore set upon a saddle 15
Him whom she loves, her idiot boy?

There's scarce a soul that's out of bed;
Good Betty! put him down again;
His lips with joy they burr at you,
But, Betty! what has he to do 20
With stirrup, saddle, or with rein?

The world will say 'tis very idle,
Bethink you of the time of night;
There's not a mother, no not one,
But when she hears what you have done, 25
Oh! Betty she'll be in a fright.

But Betty's bent on her intent,
For her good neighbour, Susan Gale,
Old Susan, she who dwells alone,
Is sick, and makes a piteous moan, 30

As if her very life would fail.

There's not a house within a mile,
No hand to help them in distress:
Old Susan lies a bed in pain,
And sorely puzzled are the twain, 35
For what she ails they cannot guess.
And Betty's husband's at the wood,
Where by the week he doth abide,
A woodman in the distant vale;
There's none to help poor Susan Gale, 40
What must be done? what will betide?

And Betty from the lane has fetched
Her pony, that is mild and good,
Whether he be in joy or pain,
Feeding at will along the lane, 45
Or bringing faggots from the wood.

And he is all in travelling trim,
And by the moonlight, Betty Foy
Has up upon the saddle set,
The like was never heard of yet, 50
Him whom she loves, her idiot boy.

And he must post without delay
Across the bridge that's in the dale,
And by the church, and o'er the down,
To bring a doctor from the town, 55
Or she will die, old Susan Gale.

There is no need of boot or spur,
There is no need of whip or wand,
For Johnny has his holly-bough,
And with a hurly-burly now 60
He shakes the green bough in his hand.

And Betty o'er and o'er has told
The boy who is her best delight,
Both what to follow, what to shun,
What do, and what to leave undone, 65

How turn to left, and how to right.

And Betty's most especial charge,
Was, "Johnny! Johnny! mind that you
"Come home again, nor stop at all,
"Come home again, whate'er befall, 70
"My Johnny do, I pray you do."

To this did Johnny answer make,
Both with his head, and with his hand,
And proudly shook the bridle too,
And then! his words were not a few, 75
Which Betty well could understand.

And now that Johnny is just going,
Though Betty's in a mighty flurry,
She gently pats the pony's side,
On which her idiot boy must ride, 80
And seems no longer in a hurry.

But when the pony moved his legs,
Oh! then for the poor idiot boy!
For joy he cannot hold the bridle,
For joy his head and heels are idle, 85
He's idle all for very joy.

And while the pony moves his legs,
In Johnny's left-hand you may see,
The green bough's motionless and dead;
The moon that shines above his head 90
Is not more still and mute than he.

His heart it was so full of glee,
That till full fifty yards were gone,
He quite forgot his holly whip,
And all his skill in horsemanship, 95
Oh! happy, happy, happy John.

And Betty's standing at the door,
And Betty's face with joy o'erflows,
Proud of herself, and proud of him,

She sees him in his travelling trim; 100
How quietly her Johnny goes.

The silence of her idiot boy,
What hopes it sends to Betty's heart!
He's at the guide-post — he turns right,
She watches till he's out of sight, 105
And Betty will not then depart.

Burr, burr — now Johnny's lips they burr,
As loud as any mill, or near it,
Meek as a lamb the pony moves,
And Johnny makes the noise he loves, 110
And Betty listens, glad to hear it.

Away she hies to Susan Gale:
And Johnny's in a merry tune,
The owlets hoot, the owlets curr,
And Johnny's lips they burr, burr, burr, 115
And on he goes beneath the moon.

His steed and he right well agree,
For of this pony there's a rumour,
That should he lose his eyes and ears,
And should he live a thousand years, 120
He never will be out of humour.

But then he is a horse that thinks!
And when he thinks his pace is slack;
Now, though he knows poor Johnny well,
Yet for his life he cannot tell 125
What he has got upon his back.

So through the moonlight lanes they go,
And far into the moonlight dale,
And by the church, and o'er the down,
To bring a doctor from the town, 130
To comfort poor old Susan Gale.

And Betty, now at Susan's side,
Is in the middle of her story,

What comfort Johnny soon will bring,
With many a most diverting thing, 135
Of Johnny's wit and Johnny's glory.

And Betty's still at Susan's side:
By this time she's not quite so flurried;
Demure with porringer and plate
She sits, as if in Susan's fate 140
Her life and soul were buried.

But Betty, poor good woman! she,
You plainly in her face may read it,
Could lend out of that moment's store
Five years of happiness or more, 145
To any that might need it.

But yet I guess that now and then
With Betty all was not so well,
And to the road she turns her ears,
And thence full many a sound she hears, 150
Which she to Susan will not tell.

Poor Susan moans, poor Susan groans,
"As sure as there's a moon in heaven,"
Cries Betty, "he'll be back again;
"They'll both be here, 'tis almost ten, 155
"They'll both be here before eleven."

Poor Susan moans, poor Susan groans,
The clock gives warning for eleven;
'Tis on the stroke — "If Johnny's near,"
Quoth Betty "he will soon be here, 160
"As sure as there's a moon in heaven."

The clock is on the stroke of twelve,
And Johnny is not yet in sight,
The moon's in heaven, as Betty sees,
But Betty is not quite at ease; 165
And Susan has a dreadful night.

And Betty, half an hour ago,

On Johnny vile reflections cast;
“A little idle sauntering thing!”
With other names, an endless string, 170
But now that time is gone and past.

And Betty’s drooping at the heart,
That happy time all past and gone,
“How can it be he is so late?
“The doctor he has made him wait, 175
“Susan! they’ll both be here anon.”

And Susan’s growing worse and worse,
And Betty’s in a sad quandary;
And then there’s nobody to say
If she must go or she must stay: 180
— She’s in a sad quandary.

The clock is on the stroke of one;
But neither Doctor nor his guide
Appear along the moonlight road,
There’s neither horse nor man abroad, 185
And Betty’s still at Susan’s side.

And Susan she begins to fear
Of sad mischances not a few,
That Johnny may perhaps be drown’d,
Or lost perhaps, and never found; 190
Which they must both for ever rue.

She prefaced half a hint of this
With, “God forbid it should be true!”
At the first word that Susan said
Cried Betty, rising from the bed, 195
“Susan, I’d gladly stay with you.

“I must be gone, I must away,
“Consider, Johnny’s but half-wise;
“Susan, we must take care of him,
“If he is hurt in life or limb” — 200
“Oh God forbid!” poor Susan cries.

“What can I do?” says Betty, going,
“What can I do to ease your pain?
“Good Susan tell me, and I’ll stay;
“I fear you’re in a dreadful way, 205
“But I shall soon be back again.”

“Good Betty go, good Betty go,
“There’s nothing that can ease my pain.”
Then off she hies, but with a prayer
That God poor Susan’s life would spare, 210
Till she comes back again.

So, through the moonlight lane she goes,
And far into the moonlight dale;
And how she ran, and how she walked,
And all that to herself she talked, 215
Would surely be a tedious tale.

In high and low, above, below,
In great and small, in round and square,
In tree and tower was Johnny seen,
In bush and brake, in black and green, 220
’Twas Johnny, Johnny, every where.

She’s past the bridge that’s in the dale,
And now the thought torments her sore,
Johnny perhaps his horse forsook,
To hunt the moon that’s in the brook, 225
And never will be heard of more.

And now she’s high upon the down,
Alone amid a prospect wide;
There’s neither Johnny nor his horse,
Among the fern or in the gorse; 230
There’s neither doctor nor his guide.

“Oh saints! what is become of him?
“Perhaps he’s climbed into an oak,
“Where he will stay till he is dead;
“Or sadly he has been misled, 235
“And joined the wandering gypsey-folk.

“Or him that wicked pony’s carried
“To the dark cave, the goblins’ hall,
“Or in the castle he’s pursuing,
“Among the ghosts, his own undoing; 240
“Or playing with the waterfall.”

At poor old Susan then she railed,
While to the town she posts away;
“If Susan had not been so ill,
“Alas! I should have had him still, 245
“My Johnny, till my dying day.”

Poor Betty! in this sad distemper,
The doctor’s self would hardly spare,
Unworthy things she talked and wild,
Even he, of cattle the most mild, 250
The pony had his share.

And now she’s got into the town,
And to the doctor’s door she hies;
’Tis silence all on every side;
The town so long, the town so wide, 255
Is silent as the skies.

And now she’s at the doctor’s door,
She lifts the knocker, rap, rap, rap,
The doctor at the casement shews,
His glimmering eyes that peep and doze; 260
And one hand rubs his old night-cap.

“Oh Doctor! Doctor! where’s my Johnny?”
“I’m here, what is’t you want with me?”
“Oh Sir! you know I’m Betty Foy,
“And I have lost my poor dear boy, 265
”You know him — him you often see;

“He’s not so wise as some folks be.”
“The devil take his wisdom!” said
The Doctor, looking somewhat grim,
“What, woman! should I know of him?” 270

And, grumbling, he went back to bed.

“O woe is me! O woe is me!
“Here will I die; here will I die;
“I thought to find my Johnny here,
“But he is neither far nor near, 275
“Oh! what a wretched mother I!”

She stops, she stands, she looks about,
Which way to turn she cannot tell.
Poor Betty! it would ease her pain
If she had heart to knock again; 280
— The clock strikes three — a dismal knell!

Then up along the town she hies,
No wonder if her senses fail,
This piteous news so much it shock'd her,
She quite forgot to send the Doctor, 285
To comfort poor old Susan Gale.

And now she's high upon the down,
And she can see a mile of road,
“Oh cruel! I'm almost three-score;
“Such night as this was ne'er before, 290
“There's not a single soul abroad.”

She listens, but she cannot hear
The foot of horse, the voice of man;
The streams with softest sound are flowing,
The grass you almost hear it growing, 295
You hear it now if e'er you can.

The owlets through the long blue night
Are shouting to each other still:
Fond lovers, yet not quite hob nob,
They lengthen out the tremulous sob, 300
That echoes far from hill to hill.

Poor Betty now has lost all hope,
Her thoughts are bent on deadly sin;
A green-grown pond she just has pass'd,

And from the brink she hurries fast, 305
Lest she should drown herself therein.

And now she sits her down and weeps;
Such tears she never shed before;
“Oh dear, dear pony! my sweet joy!
“Oh carry back my idiot boy! 310
“And we will ne’er o’erload thee more.”

A thought is come into her head;
“The pony he is mild and good,
“And we have always used him well;
“Perhaps he’s gone along the dell, 315
“And carried Johnny to the wood.”

Then up she springs as if on wings;
She thinks no more of deadly sin;
If Betty fifty ponds should see,
The last of all her thoughts would be, 320
To drown herself therein.

Oh reader! now that I might tell
What Johnny and his horse are doing
What they’ve been doing all this time,
Oh could I put it into rhyme, 325
A most delightful tale pursuing!

Perhaps, and no unlikely thought!
He with his pony now doth roam
The cliffs and peaks so high that are,
To lay his hands upon a star, 330
And in his pocket bring it home.

Perhaps he’s turned himself about,
His face unto his horse’s tail,
And still and mute, in wonder lost,
All like a silent horseman-ghost, 335
He travels on along the vale.

And now, perhaps, he’s hunting sheep,
A fierce and dreadful hunter he!

Yon valley, that's so trim and green,
In five months' time, should he be seen, 340
A desert wilderness will be.

Perhaps, with head and heels on fire,
And like the very soul of evil,
He's galloping away, away,
And so he'll gallop on for aye, 345
The bane of all that dread the devil.

I to the muses have been bound,
These fourteen years, by strong indentures;
Oh gentle muses! let me tell
But half of what to him befel, 350
For sure he met with strange adventures.

Oh gentle muses! is this kind?
Why will ye thus my suit repel?
Why of your further aid bereave me?
And can ye thus unfriended leave me? 355
Ye muses! whom I love so well.

Who's yon, that, near the waterfall,
Which thunders down with headlong force,
Beneath the moon, yet shining fair,
As careless as if nothing were, 360
Sits upright on a feeding horse?

Unto his horse, that's feeding free,
He seems, I think, the rein to give;
Of moon or stars he takes no heed;
Of such we in romances read, 365
— 'Tis Johnny! Johnny! as I live.

And that's the very pony too.
Where is she, where is Betty Foy?
She hardly can sustain her fears;
The roaring water-fall she hears, 370
And cannot find her idiot boy.

Your pony's worth his weight in gold,

Then calm your terrors, Betty Foy!
She's coming from among the trees,
And now, all full in view, she sees 375
Him whom she loves, her idiot boy.

And Betty sees the pony too:
Why stand you thus Good Betty Foy?
It is no goblin, 'tis no ghost,
'Tis he whom you so long have lost, 380
He whom you love, your idiot boy.

She looks again — her arms are up —
She screams — she cannot move for joy;
She darts as with a torrent's force,
She almost has o'erturned the horse, 385
And fast she holds her idiot boy.

And Johnny burrs and laughs aloud,
Whether in cunning or in joy,
I cannot tell; but while he laughs,
Betty a drunken pleasure quaffs, 390
To hear again her idiot boy.

And now she's at the pony's tail,
And now she's at the pony's head,
On that side now, and now on this,
And almost stifled with her bliss, 395
A few sad tears does Betty shed.

She kisses o'er and o'er again,
Him whom she loves, her idiot boy,
She's happy here, she's happy there,
She is uneasy every where; 400
Her limbs are all alive with joy.

She pats the pony, where or when
She knows not, happy Betty Foy!
The little pony glad may be,
But he is milder far than she, 405
You hardly can perceive his joy.

“Oh! Johnny, never mind the Doctor;
“You’ve done your best, and that is all.”
She took the reins, when this was said,
And gently turned the pony’s head 410
From the loud water-fall.

By this the stars were almost gone,
The moon was setting on the hill,
So pale you scarcely looked at her:
The little birds began to stir, 415
Though yet their tongues were still.

The pony, Betty, and her boy,
Wind slowly through the woody dale:
And who is she, be-times abroad.
That hobbles up the steep rough road? 420
Who is it, but old Susan Gale?

Long Susan lay deep lost in thought,
And many dreadful fears beset her,
Both for her messenger and nurse;
And as her mind grew worse and worse, 425
Her body it grew better.

She turned, she toss’d herself in bed,
On all sides doubts and terrors met her;
Point after point did she discuss;
And while her mind was fighting thus, 430
Her body still grew better.

“Alas! what is become of them?
“These fears can never be endured,
“I’ll to the wood.” — The word scarce said,
Did Susan rise up from her bed, 435
As if by magic cured.

Away she posts up hill and down,
And to the wood at length is come,
She spies her friends, she shouts a greeting;
Oh me! it is a merry meeting, 440
As ever was in Christendom.

The owls have hardly sung their last,
While our four travellers homeward wend;
The owls have hooted all night long,
And with the owls began my song, 445
And with the owls must end.

For while they all were travelling home,
Cried Betty, "Tell us Johnny, do,
"Where all this long night you have been,
"What you have heard, what you have seen, 450
"And Johnny, mind you tell us true."

Now Johnny all night long had heard
The owls in tuneful concert strive;
No doubt too he the moon had seen;
For in the moonlight he had been 455
From eight o'clock till five.

And thus to Betty's question, he
Made answer, like a traveller bold,
(His very words I give to you,
"The cocks did crow to-whoo, to-whoo, 460
"And the sun did shine so cold."
— Thus answered Johnny in his glory,
And that was all his travel's story.

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