

Matthew Prior (1664-1721)

1 *Down-Hall*

A Ballad, to the Tune of King John and the Abbot of Canterbury, 1715.

- 1 I sing not old Jason, who travelled through Greece,
To kiss the fair maids, and possess the rich Fleece;
Nor sing I Æneas, who, led by his mother,
Got rid of one wife, and went far for another:
Derry down, down, hey derry down. 5
- 2 Nor him who through Asia and Europe did roam,
Ulysses by name, who ne'er cried to go home,
But rather desired to see cities and men,
Than return to his farms, and converse with old Pen.
- 3 Hang Homer and Virgil! their meaning to seek, 10
A man must have poked into Latin and Greek;
Those who love their own tongue, we have reason to hope,
Have read them translated by Dryden and Pope.
- 4 But I sing of exploits that have lately been done
By two British heroes, called Matthew and John: 15
And how they rid friendly from fine London town,
Fair Essex to see, and a place they call Down.
- 5 Now ere they went out you may rightly suppose
How much they discoursed both in prudence and prose;
For, before this great journey was thoroughly concerted, 20
Full often they met, and as often they parted.
- 6 And thus Matthew said, Look you here, my friend John,
I fairly have travelled years thirty and one;
And, though I still carried my sovereign's warrants,
I only have gone upon other folks' errands. 25
- 7 And now in this journey of life I would have
A place where to bait, 'twixt the court and the grave:
Where joyful to live, not unwilling to die; —

- Gadzooks! I have just such a place in my eye.
- 8 There are gardens so stately, and arbours so thick, 30
A portal of stone, and a fabric of brick;
The matter next week shall be all in your power;
But the money, gadzooks! must be paid in an hour.
- 9 For things in this world must by law be made certain: 35
We both must repair unto Oliver Martin;
For he is a lawyer of worthy renown,
I'll bring you to see, he must fix you at Down.
- 10 Quoth Matthew, I know, that, from Berwick to Dover, 40
You've sold all our premises over and over:
And now, if your buyers and sellers agree,
You may throw all our acres into the South Sea.
- 11 But a word to the purpose: to-morrow, dear friend, 45
We'll see what to-night you so highly commend;
And, if with a garden and house I am blessed,
Let the Devil and Coningsby go with the rest.
- 12 Then answered Squire Morley; Pray get a calash, 50
That in summer may burn, and in winter may splash;
I love dirt and dust; and 'tis always my pleasure,
To take with me much of the soil that I measure.
- 13 But Matthew thought better; for Matthew thought right, 55
And hired a chariot so trim and so tight,
That extremes both of winter and summer might pass:
For one window was canvass, the other was glass.
- 14 Draw up, quoth friend Matthew; pull down, quoth friend John, 60
We shall be both hotter and colder anon.
Thus talking and scolding, they forward did speed;
And Ralpho paced by, under Newman the Swede.
- 15 Into an old inn did this equipage roll, 65
At a town they call Hodson, the sign of the Bull;
Near a nymph with an urn, that divides the high way,
And into a puddle throws mother of tea.

- 16 Come here, my sweet landlady, pray how d 'ye do;
Where is Cicely so cleanly, and Prudence, and Sue,
And where is the widow that dwelt here below,
And the ostler that sung about eight years ago? 65
- 17 And where is your sister, so mild and so dear?
Whose voice to her maids like a trumpet was clear.
By my troth! she replies, you grow younger, I think:
And pray, Sir, what wine does the gentleman drink?
- 18 Why now let me die, Sir, or live upon trust, 70
If I know to which question to answer you first;
Why things, since I saw you, most strangely have varied,
The ostler is hanged, and the widow is married.
- 19 And Prue left a child for the parish to nurse;
And Cicely went off with a gentleman's purse; 75
And as to my sister, so mild and so dear,
She has lain in the churchyard full many a year.
- 20 Well, peace to her ashes! what signifies grief!
She roasted red veal, and she powdered lean beef;
Full nicely she knew to cook up a fine dish; 80
For tough were her pullets, and tender her fish.
- 21 For that matter, Sir, be you squire, knight, or lord,
I 'll give you whate'er a good inn can afford;
I should look on myself as unhappily sped,
Did I yield to a sister, or living, or dead. 85
- 22 Of mutton a delicate neck and a breast
Shall swim in the water in which they were drest;
And, because you great folks are with rarities taken,
Addle-eggs shall be next course, tossed up with rank bacon.
- 23 Then supper was served, and the sheets they were laid; 90
And Morley most lovingly whispered the maid.
The maid! was she handsome? why truly so-so:
But what Morley whispered we never shall know.

- 24 Then up rose these heroes as brisk as the sun,
And their horses, like his, were preparèd to run. 95
Now when in the morning Matt asked for the score,
John kindly had paid it the evening before.
- 25 Their breakfast so warm to be sure they did eat,
A custom in travellers mighty discreet;
And thus with great friendship and glee they went on, 100
To find out the place you shall hear of anon,
Called Down, down, hey derry down.
- 26 But what did they talk of from morning till noon;
Why, of spots in the sun, and the man in the moon;
Of the czar's gentle temper, the stocks in the city, 105
The wise men of Greece, and the Secret Committee.
- 27 So to Harlow they came; and hey! where are you all?
Show us into the parlour, and mind when I call;
Why, your maids have no motion, your men have no life;
Well, master, I hear you have buried your wife. 110
- 28 Come this very instant, take care to provide
Tea, sugar, and toast, and a horse and a guide;
Are the Harrisons here, both the old and the young?
And where stands fair Down, the delight of my song?
- 29 O squire, to the grief of my heart I may say, 115
I have buried two wives since you travelled this way;
And the Harrisons both may be presently here;
And Down stands, I think, where it stood the last year.
- 30 Then Joan brought the tea-pot, and Caleb the toast;
And the wine was frothed out by the hand of mine host; 120
But we cleared our extempore banquet so fast,
That the Harrisons both were forgot in the haste.
- 31 Now hey for Down-Hall! for the guide he was got;
The chariot was mounted, the horses did trot;
The guide he did bring us a dozen miles round; 125
But oh! all in vain: for no Down could be found.

- 32 O thou popish guide, thou hast led us astray,
Says he, How the devil should I know the way?
I never yet travelled this road in my life;
But Down lies on the left, I was told by my wife. 130
- 33 Thy wife, answered Matthew, when she went abroad,
Ne'er told thee of half the by-ways she had trod:
Perhaps she met friends, and brought pence to thy house,
But thou shalt go home without ever a souse.
- 34 What is this thing, Morley, and how can you mean it? 135
We have lost our estate here, before we have seen it.
Have patience, soft Morley in anger replied:
To find out our way, let us send off our guide.
- 35 O here I spy Down, cast your eye to the west,
Where a windmill so stately stands plainly confessed. 140
On the west, replied Matthew, no windmill I find;
As well thou mayst tell me, I see the west wind:
- 36 Now pardon me, Morley, the windmill I spy,
But, faithful Achates, no house is there nigh.
Look again, says mild Morley; gadzooks! you are blind: 145
The mill stands before; and the house lies behind.
- 37 O, now a low ruined white shed I discern,
Untiled and unglazed; I believe 'tis a barn.
A barn! why you rave, 'tis a house for a squire,
A justice of peace, or a knight of our shire. 150
- 38 A house should be built, or with brick, or with stone.
Why 'tis plaster and lath; and I think that 's all one;
And such as it is, it has stood with great fame,
Been called a hall, and has given its name
To Down, down, hey derry down. 155
- 39 O Morley! O Morley! if that be a hall,
The fame with the building will suddenly fall —
With your friend Jemmy Gibbs about buildings agree;
My business is land; and it matters not me.

- 40 I wish you could tell what a deuce your head ails: 160
I showed you Down-hall; did you look for Versailles!
Then take house and farm as John Ballet will let you,
For better for worse, as I took my Dame Betty.
- 41 And now, Sir, a word to the wise is enough; 165
You 'll make very little of all your old stuff:
And to build at your age, by my troth, you grow simple!
Are you young and rich, like the master of Wimple?
- 42 If you have these whims of apartments and gardens,
From twice fifty acres you 'll ne'er see five farthings:
And in yours I shall find the true gentleman's fate; 170
Ere you finish your house, you 'll have spent your estate.
- 43 Now let us touch thumbs, and be friends ere we part.
Here, John, is my thumb, and here, Mat, is my heart;
To Halstead I speed, and you go back to town.
Thus ends the first part of the ballad of Down. 175
Derry down, down, hey derry down.

1715

(From *The Poetical Works of Matthew Prior*. Ed. the Rev. George Gilfillan. Edinburgh, 1858)