The Idiot Boy
by William Wordsworth

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

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

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

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

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

27 But Betty's bent on her intent,
28 For her good neighbour, Susan Gale,
29 Old Susan, she who dwells alone,
30 Is sick, and makes a piteous moan,
31 As if her very life would fail.

32 There's not a house within a mile,
33 No hand to help them in distress:
34 Old Susan lies a bed in pain,
35 And sorely puzzled are the twain,
36 For what she ails they cannot guess.

37 And Betty's husband's at the wood,
38 Where by the week he doth abide,
39 A woodman in the distant vale;
40 There's none to help poor Susan Gale,
41 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,
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,
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,
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
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 to do, and what to leave undone,
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 befal,
"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,
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,
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,
He's idle all for very joy.

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

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

97 And Betty's standing at the door,
98 And Betty's face with joy o'erflows,
99 Proud of herself, and proud of him,
100 She sees him in his travelling trim;
101 How quietly her Johnny goes.

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

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

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

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

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

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

132 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,  
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  
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,  
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,  
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,  
"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,  
"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;  
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,  
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,  
"Susan! they'll both be here anon."

And Susan's growing worse and worse,  
And Betty's in sad quandary;
And then there's nobody to say
If she must go or she must stay:
--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,
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;
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,
"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"--
"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,
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,
Till she comes back again.

O, 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,
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,
'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,
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;
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,
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;
"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,
"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,
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,
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;
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,
"You know him--him you often see;

"He's not as wise as some folks be,"
"The devil take his wisdom!" said
The Doctor, looking somewhat grim,
"What, woman! should I know of him?"
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,
"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 the heart to knock again;
---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,
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,
"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,
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,
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,
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!
"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,
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,
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,
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,
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,
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,
A desart wilderness will be.

Perhaps, with head and heels on fire,
And like the very soul of evil,
He's galloping away, away,
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,
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 you thus unfriended leave me?
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,
361 Sits upright on a feeding horse?

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

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

372 Your pony's worth his weight in gold,
373 Then calm your terrors, Betty Foy!
374 She's coming from among the trees,
375 And now, all full in view, she sees
376 Him whom she loves, her idiot boy.

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

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

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

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

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

402 She pats the pony, where or when
403 She knows not, happy Betty Foy!
404 The little pony glad may be,
405 But he is milder far than she,
406 You hardly can perceive his joy.
407 "Oh! Johnny, never mind the Doctor;
408 "You've done your best, and that is all."
409 She took the reins, when this was said,
410 And gently turned the pony's head
411 From the loud water-fall.

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

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

422 Long Susan lay deep lost in thought,
423 And many dreadful fears beset her,424 Both for her messenger and nurse;
425 And as her mind grew worse and worse,
426 Her body it grew better.

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

432 "Alas! what is become of them?
433 "These fears can never be endured,
434 "I'll to the wood."--The word scarce said,
435 Did Susan rise up from her bed,
436 As if by magic cured.

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

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

447 For while they all were travelling home,
448 Cried Betty, "Tell us Johnny, do,
449 "Where all this long night you have been,
450 "What you have heard, what you have seen,
451 "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
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,
And the sun did shine so cold."
--Thus answered Johnny in his glory,
And that was all his travel's story.