

# 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?

42 And Betty from the lane has fetched  
43 Her pony, that is mild and good,44 Whether he be in joy or pain,  
45 Feeding at will along the lane,  
46 Or bringing faggots from the wood.

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

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

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

62 And Betty o'er and o'er has told  
63 The boy who is her best delight,  
64 Both what to follow, what to shun,  
65 What do, and what to leave undone,  
66 How turn to left, and how to right.

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

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

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

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

87 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,

133 Is in the middle of her story,  
134 What comfort Johnny soon will bring,  
135 With many a most diverting thing,  
136 Of Johnny's wit and Johnny's glory.

137 And Betty's still at Susan's side:  
138 By this time she's not quite so flurried; 139 Demure with porringer and plate  
140 She sits, as if in Susan's fate  
141 Her life and soul were buried.

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

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

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

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

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

167 And Betty, half an hour ago,  
168 On Johnny vile reflections cast;  
169 "A little idle sauntering thing!"  
170 With other names, an endless string,  
171 But now that time is gone and past.

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

177 And Susan's growing worse and worse,  
178 And Betty's in sad quandary;

179 And then there's nobody to say  
180 If she must go or she must stay:  
181 --She's in a sad quandary.

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

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

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

197 "I must be gone, I must away,  
198 "Consider, Johnny's but half-wise;  
199 "Susan, we must take care of him,  
200 "If he is hurt in life or limb"--  
201 "Oh God forbid!" poor Susan cries.

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

207 "Good Betty go, good Betty go,  
208 "There's nothing that can ease my pain."  
209 Then off she hies, but with a prayer  
210 That God poor Susan's life would spare,  
211 Till she comes back again.

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

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

222 She's past the bridge that's in the dale,  
223 And now the thought torments her sore,

224 Johnny perhaps his horse forsook,  
225 To hunt the moon that's in the brook,  
226 And never will be heard of more.

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

232 "Oh saints! what is become of him?  
233 "Perhaps he's climbed into an oak,234 "Where he will stay till he is dead;  
235 "Or sadly he has been misled,  
236 "And joined the wandering gypsey-folk.

237 "Or him that wicked pony's carried  
238 "To the dark cave, the goblins' hall,  
239 "Or in the castle he's pursuing,  
240 "Among the ghosts, his own undoing;  
241 "Or playing with the waterfall."

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

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

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

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

262 "Oh Doctor! Doctor! where's my Johnny?"  
263 "I'm here, what is't you want with me?"  
264 "Oh Sir! you know I'm Betty Foy,  
265 "And I have lost my poor dear boy,  
266 "You know him--him you often see;

267 "He's not as wise as some folks be,"  
268 "The devil take his wisdom!" said  
269 The Doctor, looking somewhat grim,

270 "What, woman! should I know of him?"  
271 And, grumbling, he went back to bed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

302 Poor Betty now has lost all hope,  
303 Her thoughts are bent on deadly sin;  
304 A green-grown pond she just has pass'd,  
305 And from the brink she hurries fast,  
306 Lest she should drown herself therein.

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

312 A thought is come into her head;  
313 "The pony he is mild and good,  
314 "And we have always used him well;

315 "Perhaps **he's** gone **along** the dell,  
316 "And carried Johnny to the wood."

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

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

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

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

337 And now, perhaps, he's hunting sheep,  
338 A fierce and dreadful hunter he!  
339 Yon valley, that's so trim and green,  
340 In five months' time, should he be seen,  
341 A desert wilderness will be.

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

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

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

357 Who's yon, that, near the waterfall,  
358 Which thunders down with headlong force,  
359 Beneath the moon, yet shining fair,  
360 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."

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

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