

# **The Diverting History of John Gilpin**

William Cowper

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JOHN GILPIN was a citizen  
Of credit and renown,  
A train-band captain eke was he  
Of famous London town.

John Gilpin's spouse said to her dear,  
'Though wedded we have been  
These twice ten tedious years, yet we  
No holiday have seen.

'To-morrow is our wedding-day,  
And we will then repair  
Unto the Bell at Edmonton,  
All in a chaise and pair.

'My sister, and my sister's child,  
Myself, and children three,  
Will fill the chaise; so you must ride  
On horseback after we.'

He soon replied, 'I do admire  
Of womankind but one,  
And you are she, my dearest dear,  
Therefore it shall be done.

'I am a linen-draper bold,  
As all the world doth know,  
And my good friend the calender  
Will lend his horse to go.'

Quoth Mrs. Gilpin, 'That's well said;  
And for that wine is dear,  
We will be furnished with our own,  
Which is both bright and clear.'

John Gilpin kissed his loving wife;  
O'erjoyed was he to find,  
That though on pleasure she was bent,  
She had a frugal mind.

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The morning came, the chaise was brought,  
But yet was not allowed  
To drive up to the door, lest all  
Should say that she was proud.

So three doors off the chaise was stayed,  
Where they did all get in;  
Six precious souls, and all agog  
To dash through thick and thin.

Smack went the whip, round went the wheels,  
Were never folk so glad,  
The stones did rattle underneath,  
As if Cheapside were mad.

John Gilpin at his horse's side  
Seized fast the flowing mane,  
And up he got, in haste to ride,  
But soon came down again;

For saddle-tree scarce reached had be,  
His journey to begin,  
When, turning round his head, he saw  
Three customers come in.

So down he came; for loss of time,  
Although it grieved him sore,  
Yet loss of pence, full well he knew,  
Would trouble him much more.

'Twas long before the customers  
Were suited to their mind,  
When Betty screaming came down stairs,  
'The wine is left behind!'

'Good lack,' quoth he 'yet bring it me,  
My leathern belt likewise,  
In which I bear my trusty sword,  
When I do exercise.'

Now Mistress Gilpin (careful soul!)  
Had two stone bottles found,  
To hold the liquor that she loved,  
And keep it safe and sound.

Each bottle had a curling ear,  
Through which the belt he drew,  
And hung a bottle on each side,  
To make his balance true.

Then over all, that he might be

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Equipped from top to toe,  
His long red cloak, well brushed and neat;  
He manfully did throw.

Now see him mounted once again  
Upon his nimble steed,  
Full slowly pacing o'er the stones,  
With caution and good heed.

But finding soon a smoother road  
Beneath his well-shod feet,  
The snorting beast began to trot,  
Which galled him in his seat.

So, 'Fair and softly,' John he cried,  
But John he called in vain;  
That trot became a gallop soon,  
In spite of curb and rein.

So stooping down as needs he must  
Who cannot sit upright,  
He grasped the mane with both his hands,  
And eke with all his might.

His horse, who never in that sort  
Had handled been before,  
What thing upon his back had got  
Did wonder more and more.

Away went Gilpin, neck or nought;  
Away went hat and wig;  
He little dreamt, when he set out,  
Of running such a rig.

The wind did blow, the cloak did fly,  
Like streamer long and gay,  
Till, loop and button failing both,  
At last it flew away.

Then might all people well discern  
The bottles he had slung;  
A bottle swinging at each side.  
As hath been said or sung.

The dogs did bark, the children screamed,  
Up flew the windows all;  
And every soul cried out, 'Well done!'  
As loud as he could bawl.

Away went Gilpin who but he?  
His fame soon spread around;

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'He carries weight! He rides a race!'  
'Tis for a thousand pound!

And still, as fast as he drew near,  
'Twas wonderful to view,  
How in a trice the turnpike-men  
Their gates wide open threw.

And now, as he went bowing down  
His reeking head full low,  
The bottles twain behind his back  
Were shattered at a blow.

Down ran the wine into the road,  
Most piteous to be seen,  
Which made his horse's flanks to smoke  
As they had basted been.

But still he seemed to carry weight,  
With leathern girdle braced;  
For all might see the bottle-necks  
Still dangling at his waist.

Thus all through merry Islington  
These gambols he did play,  
Until he came unto the Wash  
Of Edmonton so gay;

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.

At Edmonton his loving wife  
From the balcony spied  
Her tender husband, wondering much  
To see how he did ride.

'Stop, stop, John Gilpin! Here's the house!'  
They all at once did cry;  
'The dinner waits, and we are tired;'  
Said Gilpin 'So am I!'

But yet his horse was not a whit  
Inclined to tarry there!  
For why? his owner had a house  
Full ten miles off at Ware.

So like an arrow swift he flew,  
Shot by an archer strong;  
So did he fly which brings me to

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The middle of my song.

Away went Gilpin, out of breath,  
And sore against his will,  
Till at his friend the calender's  
His horse at last stood still.

The calender, amazed to see  
His neighbour in such trim,  
Laid down his pipe, flew to the gate,  
And thus accosted him:

'What news? what news? your tidings tell;  
Tell me you must and shall  
Say why bareheaded you are come,  
Or why you come at all?'

Now Gilpin had a pleasant wit,  
And loved a timely joke;  
And thus unto the calender  
In merry guise he spoke:

'I came because your horse would come,  
And, if I well forebode,  
My hat and wig will soon be here,  
They are upon the road.'

The calender, right glad to find  
His friend in merry pin,  
Returned him not a single word,  
But to the house went in;

Whence straight he came with hat and wig;  
A wig that flowed behind,  
A hat not much the worse for wear,  
Each comely in its kind.

He held them up, and in his turn  
Thus showed his ready wit,  
'My head is twice as big as yours,  
They therefore needs must fit.

'But let me scrape the dirt away  
That hangs upon your face;  
And stop and eat, for well you may  
Be in a hungry case.'

Said John, 'It is my wedding day,  
And all the world would stare,  
If wife should dine at Edmonton,  
And I should dine at Ware.'

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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.'

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;

Whereat his horse did snort, as he  
    Had heard a lion roar,  
And galloped off with all his might,  
    As he had done before.

Away went Gilpin, and away  
    Went Gilpin's hat and wig;  
He lost them sooner than at first;  
    For why? they were too big.

Now Mistress Gilpin, when she saw  
    Her husband posting down  
Into the country far away,  
    She pulled out half a crown;

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.'

The youth did ride, and soon did meet  
    John coming back again:  
Whom in a trice he tried to stop,  
    By catching at his rein;

But not performing what he meant,  
    And gladly would have done,  
The frightened steed he frightened more,  
    And made him faster run.

Away went Gilpin, and away  
    Went postboy at his heels,  
The postboy's horse right glad to miss  
    The lumbering of the wheels.

Six gentlemen upon the road,  
    Thus seeing Gilpin fly,  
With postboy scampering in the rear,  
    They raised the hue and cry:



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'Stop thief! stop thief! a highwayman!'  
Not one of them was mute;  
And all and each that passed that way  
Did join in the pursuit.

And now the turnpike gates again  
Flew open in short space;  
The toll-men thinking, as before,  
That Gilpin rode a race.

And so he did, and won it too,  
For he got first to town;  
Nor stopped till where he had got up  
He did again get down.

Now let us sing, Long live the King!  
And Gilpin, long live he!  
And when he next doth ride abroad  
May I be there to see!