

brave men? Is that what Heaven is now revealing to you?"

"No, my lord, I am only looking at a hawk which hovers about there in the clouds. I saw him mount, earl, and only think of the wonder—he had in each talon a dove! Two doves for one hawk. Is not that too much—wholly contrary to law and nature?"

The earl cast on him a penetrating and distrustful look. But John Heywood, remaining perfectly calm and unembarrassed, continued looking at the clouds.

"How stupid such a brute is, and how much to his disadvantage will his very greediness be! For since he holds a dove in each claw, he will not be able to enjoy either of them; because he has no claw at liberty with which to tear them. Soon as he wishes to enjoy the one, the other will escape; when he grabs after that, the other flies away; and so at last he will have nothing at all, because he was too rapacious and wanted more than he could use."

"And you are looking after this hawk in the skies? But you are perhaps mistaken, and he whom you seek is not above there at all, but here below, and perchance quite close to you?" asked Thomas Seymour significantly.

But John Heywood would not understand him.

"Nay," said he, "he still flies, but it will not last long. For verily I saw the owner of the dovecot from which the hawk has stolen the two doves. He had a weapon; and he, be ye sure of it—he will kill this hawk, because he has robbed him of his pet doves."

"Enough, enough!" cried the earl, impatiently. "You would give me a lesson, but you must know I take no counsel from a fool, even were he the wisest."

"In that you are right, my lord, for only fools are so foolish as to hearken to the voice of wisdom. Besides, each man forges his own fortune. And now, wise sir, I will give you a key, which you yourself have forged, and behind which lies your fortune. There, take this key; and if you at midnight slip through the garden to the

tower over yonder, this key will open to you the door of the same, and you can then without hesitation mount the spiral staircase and open the door which is opposite the staircase. Behind that you will find the fortune which you have forged for yourself, sir blacksmith, and which will bid you welcome with warm lips and soft arms. And so commending you to God, I must hasten home to think over the comedy which the king has commanded me to write."

"But you do not so much as tell me from whom this message comes?" said Earl Sudley, retaining him. "You invite me to a meeting and give me a key, and I know not who will await me there in that tower."

"Oh, you do not know? There is then more than one who *might* await you there? Well, then, it is the youngest and smallest of the two doves who sends you the key."

"Princess Elizabeth?"

"You have named her, not I!" said John Heywood, as he disengaged himself from the earl's grasp and hurried across the courtyard to betake himself to his lodgings.

Thomas Seymour watched him with a scowl, and then slowly directed his eyes to the key that Heywood had given him.

"The princess then awaits me," whispered he, softly. "Ah, who can read it in the stars? who can know whither the crown will roll when it tumbles from King Henry's head? I love Catharine, but I love ambition still more; and if it is demanded, to ambition must I sacrifice my heart."

CHAPTER XVII.

GAMMER GURTON'S NEEDLE.

SLOWLY and lost in gloomy thought, John Heywood walked toward his lodgings. These lodgings were situated in the second or inner court of the vast palace of White-

hall, in that wing of the castle which contained the apartments of all the higher officers of the royal household, and so those of the court-jesters also; for the king's fool was at that period a very important and respectable personage, who occupied a rank equal to that of a gentleman of the royal bed-chamber.

John Heywood had just crossed this second courtyard, when all at once loud, wrangling voices, and the clear, peculiar ring of a box on the ear, startled him out of his meditations.

He stopped and listened.

His face, before so serious, had now reassumed its usual merry and shrewd expression; his large eyes again glittered with humor and mischief.

"There again verily is my sweet, charming housekeeper, Gammer Gurton," said John Heywood, laughing; "and she no doubt is quarrelling again with my excellent servant, that poor, long-legged, blear-eyed Hodge. Ah! ha! Yesterday I surprised her as she applied a kiss to him, at which he made as doleful a face as if a bee had stung him. To-day I hear how she is boxing his ears. He is perhaps now laughing at it, and thinks it is a rose-leaf which cools his cheek. That Hodge is such a queer bird! But we will at once see what there is to-day, and what farce is being performed now."

He crept softly up-stairs, and, opening the door of his room, closed it again behind him quickly and gently.

Gammer Gurton, who was in the room adjoining, had heard nothing, seen nothing; and had the heavens come tumbling down at that moment, she would have scarcely noticed it; for she had eyes and sense only for this long, lank lackey who stood before her shaking with fear, and staring at her out of his great bluish-white eyes. Her whole soul lay in her tongue; and her tongue ran as fast as a will-wheel, and with the force of thunder.

How, then, could Gammer Gurton well have time and ears to hear her master, who had softly entered his cham-

ber and slyly crept to the door, only half closed, which separated his room from that of the housekeeper?

"How!" screamed Gammer Gurton, "you silly ragamuffin, you wish to make me believe that it was the cat that ran away with my sewing-needle, as if my sewing-needle were a mouse and smelt of bacon, you stupid, blear-eyed fool!"

"Ah, you call me a fool," cried Hodge, with a laugh, which caused his mouth to describe a graceful line across his face from ear to ear; "you call me a fool, and that is a great honor for me, for then I am a servant worthy of my master. And as to being blear-eyed, that must be caused by the simple fact that I have nothing all day long before my eyes but you, Gammer Gurton—you, with your face like a full moon—you, sailing through the room like a frigate, and with your grappling-irons, your hands, smashing to pieces everything except your own looking-glass."

"You shall pay me for that, you double-faced, thread-bare lout!" screamed Gammer Gurton, as she rushed on Hodge with clenched fist.

But John Heywood's cunning servant had anticipated this; he had already slipped under the large table which stood in the middle of the room. As the housekeeper now made a plunge to drag him out of his extemporary fortress, he gave her such a hearty pinch on the leg, that she sprang back with a scream, and sank, wholly overcome by the pain, into the huge, leather-covered elbow-chair which was near her workstand at the window.

"You are a monster, Hodge," groaned she, exhausted—"a heartless, horrible monster. You have stolen my sewing-needle—you only. For you knew very well that it was my last one, and that, if I have not that, I must go at once to the shopkeeper to buy some needles. And that is just what you want, you weathercock, you. You only want me to go out, that you may have an opportunity to play with Tib."

"Tib? Who is Tib?" asked Hodge as he stretched out his long neck from under the table, and stared at Gammer Gurton with well-assumed astonishment.

"Now this otter wants me yet to tell him who Tib is!" screamed the exasperated dame. "Well, then, I will tell you. Tib is the cook for the major-domo over there—a black-eyed, false, coquettish little devil, who is bad and mean enough to troll away the lover of an honest and virtuous woman, as I am; a lover who is such a pitiful little thing that one would think no one but myself could find him out and see him; nor could I have done it had I not for forty years trained my eyes to the search, and for forty years looked around for the man who was at length to marry me, and make me a respectable mistress. Since my eyes then were at last steadily fixed on this phantom of man, and I found nothing there, I finally discovered you, you cobweb of a man!"

"What! you call me a cobweb?" screamed Hodge, as he crept from under the table, and, drawing himself up to his full height, placed himself threateningly in front of Gammer Gurton's elbow-chair. "You call me a cobweb? Now, I swear to you that you shall henceforth never more be the spider that dwells in that web! For you are a garden-spider, an abominable, dumpy, old garden-spider, for whom a web, such as Hodge is, is much too fine and much too elegant. Be quiet, therefore, old spider, and spin your net elsewhere! You shall not live in my net, but Tib—for, yes, I do know Tib. She is a lovely, charming child of fourteen, as quick and nimble as a kid, with lips red as the coral which you wear on your fat pudding of a neck, with eyes which shine yet brighter than your nose, and with a figure so slender and graceful that she might have been carved out of one of your fingers. Yes, yes, I know Tib. She is an affectionate, good child, who would never be so hard-hearted as to abuse the man she loves, and could not be so mean and pitiful, even in thought, as to wish to marry the man she did not love,

just because he is a man. Yes, I know Tib, and now I will go straight to her and ask her if she will marry a good, honest lad, who, to be sure, is somewhat lean, but who doubtless will become fatter if he has any other fare than the meagre, abominable stuff on which Gammer Gurton feeds him; a lad who, to be sure, is bleary-eyed, but will soon get over that disease when he no more sees Gammer Gurton, who acts on his eyes like a stinking onion, and makes them always red and running water. Good-by, old onion! I am going to Tib."

But Gammer Gurton whirled up out of her elbow-chair like a top, and was upon Hodge, whom she held by the coat-tail, and brought him to a stand.

"You dare go to Tib again! You dare pass that door and you shall see that the gentle, peaceable, and patient Gammer Gurton is changed into a lioness, when any one tries to tear from her that most sacred and dearest of treasures, her husband. For you are my husband, inasmuch as I have your word that you will marry me."

"But I have not told you when and where I will do it, Gammer Gurton; and so you can wait to all eternity, for only in heaven will I be your husband."

"That is an abominable, malicious lie!" screamed Gammer Gurton. "A good-for-nothing lie, say I! For did you not long ago snivel and beg till I was forced to promise you to make a will, and in it declare Hodge, my beloved husband, sole heir of all my goods and chattels, and bequeath to him everything I have scraped together in my virtuous and industrious life?"

"But you did not make it—the will. You broke your word; and, therefore, I will do the same."

"Yes, I have made it, you greyhound. I have made it; and this very day I was going with you to a justice of the peace and have it signed, and then to-morrow we would have got married."

"You have made the will, you round world of love?"

said Hodge tenderly, as with his long, withered, spindling arms he tried to clasp the gigantic waist of his beloved. "You have made the will and declared me your heir? Come, then, Gammer Gurton, come, let us go to the justice of the peace!"

"But do you not see, then," said Gammer Gurton, with a tender, cat-like purr, "do you not see, then, that you rumple my frill when you hug me so? Let me go, then, and help me find my needle quickly, for without the needle we cannot go to the justice of the peace."

"What, without the needle not go to the justice of the peace?"

"No; for only see this hole which Gib, the cat, tore in my prettiest cap awhile ago, as I took the cap out of the box and laid it on the table. Indeed I cannot go to the justice of the peace with such a hole in my cap! Search then, Hodge, search, so that I can mend my cap, and go with you to the justice of the peace!"

"Lord God, where in the world can it be, the unlucky needle? I must have it, I must find it, so that Gammer Gurton may take her will to the justice of the peace!"

And in frantic desperation, Hodge searched all about on the floor for the lost needle, and Gammer Gurton stuck her large spectacles on her flaming red nose and peered about on the table. So eager was she in the search, that she even let her tongue rest a little, and deep silence reigned in the room.

Suddenly this silence was broken by a voice, which seemed to come from the courtyard. It was a soft, sweet voice that cried: "Hodge, dear Hodge, are you there? Come to me in the court, only for a few minutes! I want to have a bit of a laugh with you!"

It was as though an electric shock had passed through the room with that voice, and struck at the same time both Gammer Gurton and Hodge.

Both startled, and discontinuing the search, stood there wholly immovable, as if petrified.



GAMMER GURTON'S QUARREL WITH HODGE.

Hodge especially, poor Hodge, was as if struck by lightning. His great bluish-white eyes appeared to be coming out of their sockets; his long arms hung down, flapping and dangling about like a flail; his knees, half bent, seemed already to be giving way in expectation of the approaching storm.

This storm did not in fact make him wait long.

"That is Tib!" screamed Gammer Gurton, springing like a lioness upon Hodge and seizing him by the shoulders with both her hands. "That is Tib, you thread-like, pitiful greyhound! Well, was I not right, now, when I called you a faithless, good-for-nothing scamp, that spares not innocence, and breaks the hearts of the women as he would a cracker, which he swallows at his pleasure? Was I not right, in saying that you were only watching for me to go out in order to go and sport with Tib?"

"Hodge, my dear, darling Hodge," cried the voice beneath there, and this time louder and more tender than before, "Hodge, oh come, do now, come with me in the court, as you promised me; come and get the kiss for which you begged me this morning!"

"I will be a damned otter, if I begged her for it, and if I understand a single word of what she says!" said Hodge, wholly dumfounded and quaking all over.

"Ah, you understand not a word of what she says?" screamed Gammer Gurton. "Well, but *I* understand it. I understand that everything between us is past and done with, and that I have nothing more to do with you, you Moloch, you! I understand that I shall not go and make my will, to become your wife and fret myself to death over this skeleton of a husband, that I may leave you to chuckle as my heir. No, no, it is past. I am not going to the justice of the peace, and I will tear up my will!"

"Oh, she is going to tear up her will!" howled Hodge; "and then I have tormented myself in vain; in vain have endured the horrible luck of being loved by this old owl!"

Oh, oh, she will not make her will, and Hodge will remain the same miserable dog he always was!"

Gammer Gurton laughed scornfully. "Ah, you are aware at last what a pitiable wretch you are, and how much a noble and handsome person, as I am, lowered herself when she made up her mind to pick up such a weed and make him her husband."

"Yes, yes, I know it!" whined Hodge; "and I pray you pick me up and take me, and above all things make your will!"

"No, I will not take you, and I shall not make my will! It is all over with, I tell you; and now you can go as soon as you please to Tib, who has called you so lovingly. But first give me back my sewing-needle, you magpie, you! Give me here my sewing-needle, which you have stolen. It is of no use to you now, for it is not necessary for me to go out in order that you may go and see Tib. We have nothing more to do with each other, and you can go where you wish. My sewing-needle, say I—my needle, or I will hang you as a scarecrow in my pea-patch, to frighten the sparrows out of it. My sewing-needle, or——"

She shook her clenched fist threateningly at Hodge, fully convinced that now, as always before, Hodge would retreat before this menacing weapon of his jealous and irritable lady-love, and seek safety under the bed or the table.

This time, however, she was mistaken. Hodge, who saw that all was lost, felt that his patience was at length exhausted; and his timidity was now changed to the madness of despair. The lamb was transformed into a tiger, and with a tiger's rage he pounced upon Gammer Gurton, and, throwing aside her fist, he dealt her a good sound blow on the cheek.

The signal was given, and the battle began. It was waged by both sides with equal animosity and equal vigor; only Hodge's bony hand made by far the most telling blows on Gammer Gurton's mass of flesh, and was always

certain, wherever he struck, to hit some spot of this huge mass; while Gammer Gurton's soft hand seldom touched that thin, threadlike figure, which dexterously parried every blow.

"Stop, you fools!" suddenly shouted a stentorian voice. "See you not, you goblins, that your lord and master is here? Peace, peace then, you devils, and do not be hammering away at one another, but love each other."

"It is the master!" exclaimed Gammer Gurton, lowering her fist in the utmost contrition.

"Do not turn me away, sir!" moaned Hodge; "do not dismiss me from your service because at last I have for once given the old hag a good bruising. She has deserved it a long time, and an angel himself must at last lose patience with her."

"I turn you out of my service!" exclaimed John Heywood, as he wiped his eyes, wet with laughing. "No, Hodge, you are a real jewel, a mine of fun and merriment; and you two have, without knowing it, furnished me with the choicest materials for a piece which, by the king's order, I have to write within six days. I owe you, then, many thanks, and will show my gratitude forthwith. Listen well to me, my amorous and tender pair of turtle-doves, and mark what I have to say to you. One cannot always tell the wolf by his hide, for he sometimes put on a sheep's skin; and so, too, a man cannot always be recognized by his voice, for he sometimes borrows that of his neighbor. Thus, for example, I know a certain John Heywood, who can mimic exactly the voice of a certain little miss named Tib, and who knows how to warble as she herself: 'Hodge, my dear Hodge!'"

And he repeated to them exactly, and with the same tone and expression, the words that the voice had previously cried.

"Ah, it was you, sir?" cried Hodge, with a broad grin—"that Tib in the court there, that Tib about whom we have been pummelling each other?"

"I was Tib, Hodge—I who was present during the whole of your quarrel, and found it hugely comical to send Tib's voice thundering into the midst of our lovers' quarrel, like a cannon-stroke! Ah, ha! Hodge, that was a fine bomb-shell, was it not? And as I said 'Hodge, my dear Hodge,' you tumbled about like a kernel of corn which a dung-beetle blows with his breath. No, no, my worthy and virtuous Gammer Gurton, it was not Tib who called the handsome Hodge, and more than that, I saw Tib, as your contest began, go out at the courtyard gate."

"It was not Tib!" exclaimed Gammer Gurton, much moved, and happy as love could make her. "It was not Tib, and she was not in the court at all, and Hodge could not then go down to her, while I went to the shopkeeper's to buy needles. Oh, Hodge, Hodge, will you forgive me for this; will you forget the hard words which I spoke in the fury of my anguish, and can you love me again?"

"I will try," said Hodge, gravely; "and without doubt I shall succeed, provided you go to-day forthwith to the justice, and make your will."

"I will make my will, and to-morrow we will go to the priest; shall it not be so, my angel?"

"Yes, we go to the priest to-morrow!" growled Hodge, as with a frightful grimace he scratched himself behind the ears.

"And now come, my angel, and give me a kiss of reconciliation!"

She spread her arms out, and when Hodge did not come to her, but remained immovable, and steadfast in his position, she went to Hodge and pressed him tenderly to her heart.

Suddenly she uttered a shriek, and let go of Hodge. She had felt a terrible pain in her breast. It seemed as though a small dagger had pierced her bosom.

And there it was, the lost needle, and Hodge then was innocent and pure as the early dawn.

He had not mischievously purloined the needle, so that

Gammer Gurton would be compelled to leave her house in order to fetch some new needles from the shopkeeper's; he had not intended to go to Tib, for Tib was not in the court, but had gone out.

"Oh Hodge, Hodge, good Hodge, you innocent dove, will you forgive me?"

"Come to the justice of the peace, Gammer Gurton, and I forgive you!"

They sank tenderly into each other's arms, wholly forgetful of their master, who still stood near them, and looked on, laughing and nodding his head.

"Now, then, I have found the finest and most splendid materials for my piece," said John Heywood, as he left the loving pair and betook himself to his own room. "Gammer Gurton has saved me, and King Henry will not have the satisfaction of seeing me whipped by those most virtuous and most lovely ladies of his court. To work, then, straightway to work!"

He seated himself at his writing-desk, and seized pen and paper.

"But how!" asked he, suddenly pausing. "That is certainly a rich subject for a composition; but I can never in the world get an interlude out of it! What shall I do with it? Abandon this subject altogether, and again jeer at the monks and ridicule the nuns? That is antiquated and worn out! I will write something new, something wholly new, and something which will make the king so merry, that he will not sign a death-warrant for a whole day. Yes, yes, a merry play shall it be, and then I will call it boldly and fearlessly a comedy!"

He seized his pen and wrote: "*Gammer Gurton's Needle, a right pithy, pleasant, and merry comedy.*"

And thus originated the first English comedy, by John Heywood, fool to King Henry the Eighth.*

* This comedy was first printed in the year 1661, but it was represented at Christ College fully a hundred years previously. Who was the author of it is not known with certainty; but it is possible that