

## GAMMELYN, THE DRESSMAKER

By Laurence Housman

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There was once upon a time a King's daughter who was about to be given in marriage to a great prince; and when the wedding day was yet a long way off, the whole court began to concern itself as to how the bride was to be dressed. What she should wear and how she should wear it was the question debated by the King and his Court day and night, almost without interruption. Whatever it was to be, it must be splendid, without peer. Must it be silk, or velvet, or satin; should it be enriched with brocade or with gems or sewn thick with pearls?

But when they came to ask the Princess, she said, "I will have only a dress of beaten gold, light as gossamer, thin as beeswing, soft as swansdown."

Then the King, calling his chief goldsmith, told him to make for the Princess the dress of beaten gold. But the goldsmith knew no way how such a dress was to be made, and his answer to the King was, "Sire, the thing is not to be done."

Then the King grew very angry, for he said, "What a Princess can find it in her head to wish, some man must find it in his wits to accomplish." So he put the chief goldsmith in prison to think about it and, summoning all the goldsmiths in the kingdom, told them of the Princess's wish, that a dress should be made for her of beaten gold. But everyone of the goldsmiths went down on his knees to the King, saying, "Sire, the thing is not to be done." Thereupon the King clapped them all into prison, promising to cut off all their heads if in three weeks' time they had not put them together to some purpose and devised a plan for making such a dress as the Princess desired.

Now just then Gammelyn was passing through the country, and when he heard of all this, he felt very sorry for the goldsmiths, who had done nothing wrong, but had told honest truth about themselves to the King. So he set his bright wits to work, and at last said, "I think I can save the goldsmiths their heads for I have found a way of making such a dress as this fine Princess desires."

Then he went to the King and said, "I have a way for making a dress of beaten gold."

"But," said the King, "have a care, for if you fail I shall assuredly cut off your head."

All the same Gammelyn took that risk willingly and set to work. And first he asked that the Princess would tell him what style of dress it should be; and the Princess said, "Beaten gold, light as gossamer, thin as beeswing, soft as swansdown, and it must be

made thus.” So she showed him of what fashion sleeve and bodice and train should be. Then Gammelyn caused to be made (for he had a palace full of workers put under him) a most lovely dress, in the fashion the Princess had named, of white cambric closely woven; and the Princess came wondering at him, saying that it was to be only of beaten gold.

“You wait awhile!” said Gammelyn, for he had no liking for the Princess. Then he asked the King for gold out of his treasury; but the King supplied him instead with gold from the stores of the imprisoned goldsmiths. So he put it in a sack and carried it to a mill and said to the miller, “Grind me this sack full of gold into flour.” At first the miller stared at him for a madman, but when he saw the letter in Gammelyn’s hands, which the King had written, and which said, “I’ll cut off your head if you don’t!” then he set to with a will and ground the gold into fine golden flour. So Gammelyn shouldered his sack and jogged back to the palace. The next thing he did was to summon all the goldbeaters in the kingdom, which he did easily enough with the King’s letter; for directly they saw the words “I’ll cut off your head if you don’t!” and the King’s signature beneath, they came running as fast as their legs could carry them, till all the streets which led up to the palace were full of them.

Then Gammelyn chose a hundred of the strongest and took them into the chamber where the wedding dress was in making. And the dress he took and spread out on iron tables and, sprinkling the golden flour all over it, set the men to beat day and night for a whole week. And at the end of the week there was a splendid dress that looked as if it were of pure gold only. But the Princess said, “My dress must be *all* gold, and no part cambric—this will not do. “ “You wait!” said Gammelyn, “it is not finished yet.”

Then he made a fire of sweet spices and sandalwood, jasmine, and mignonette; and into the fire he put the wonderful dress.

The Princess screamed with grief and rage; for she was in love with the dress, though she was so nice in holding him to the conditions of the decree. But Gammelyn persevered, and what happened was this: the fire burnt away all the threads of the cambric, but was not hot enough to melt the gold; and when all the cambric was burnt, then he drew out of the fire a dress of beaten gold, light as gossamer, thin as bee’swing, soft as swan’sdown, and fragrant as a wind when it blows through a Sultan’s garden.

So all the goldsmiths were set free from prison; and the King appointed Gammelyn his chief goldsmith.

But when the Princess saw the dress, she was so beside herself with pride and pleasure that she must have also a dress made of pearl, light as gossamer, thin as beeswing, soft as swansdown. And the King sent for all his jewelers and told them that such a dress was to be made; but they all went down on their bended knees,

crying with one voice, "Sire, the thing is not to be done." And all the good they got for that was that they were clapped into prison till a way for doing it should be found.

Then the King said to Gammelyn, "Since my jewelers cannot make this dress, you must do it!" But Gammelyn said, "Sire, that is not in our bargain." And the only answer the King had to that was, "I'll cut off your head if you don't."

Gammelyn sighed like a seashell; but determining to make the best of a bad business, he set to work.

And, as before, he made a dress in the fashion the Princess chose, of the finest weaving. He made each part separate; the two sleeves separate, the body separate, the skirt and train separate. Then, at his desire, the King commanded that all the oysters, which were dredged out of the sea, should be brought to him. Out of these he selected the five finest oysters of all; each one was the size of a tea tray. Then he put them into a large tank, and inside each shell he put one part of the dress—the weaving of which was so fine that there was plenty of room for it, as well as for the oysters. And in course of time he drew out from each shell—from one the body, from one the skirt, from one the train, from one a sleeve, from another the other sleeve. Next he fastened each part together with thread, and put the whole dress back into the tank; and into the mouth of one oyster he put the joinery of body and skirt, and into the mouth of another the joinery of skirt and train, and into the mouth of two others the joinery of the two sleeves, and the fifth oyster he ate. So the oysters did their work, laying their soft inlay over the gown, just as they laid it over the inside of their shells; and after a time Gammelyn drew forth a dress bright and gleaming, and pure mother-of-pearl. But "No," said the Princess, "it must be all pure pearl, with nothing of thread in it." But, "Wait awhile!" said Gammelyn, "I have not finished yet."

So by a decree of the King he caused to be gathered together all the moths in the kingdom—millions of moths; and he put them all into a bare iron room along with the dress and sealed the doors and windows with red sealing wax. The Princess wept and sighed for the dress: "It will be all eaten," said she. "Then I shall cut off his head," said the King. But for all that, Gammelyn persevered.

And when he opened the door, they found that every thread had been eaten away by the moths, while the mother-of-pearl had been left uninjured. So the dress was a perfect pearl, light as gossamer, thin as beeswing, soft as swansdown; and the King made Gammelyn his chief jeweler and set all the other jewelers free.

Then the Princess was so delighted that she wished to have one more dress also, made all of butterflies' wings. "That were easily done," said Gammelyn, "but it were cruel to ask for such a dress to be made."

Nevertheless the Princess would have it so, and *he* should make it. "I'll cut off your head if you don't," said the King.

Gammelyn bumbled like a bee; but all he said was, “Many million butterflies will be wanted for such a work: you must let me have again the two dresses—the pearl, and the gold—for butterflies love bright colors that gleam and shine; and with these alone can I gather them all to one place.”

So the Princess gave him the two dresses; and he went to the highest part of the palace, out onto the battlements of the great tower. There he faced toward the west where lay a new moon, louting toward the setting sun; and he laid the two robes, one on either arm, spreading them abroad, till they looked like two wings—a gold and a pearl. And a beam of the sun came and kissed the gold wing, and a pale quivering thread of moonlight touched the pearl wing; and Gammelyn sang:

“Light of the moon,  
Light of the sun,  
Pearl of the sky,  
Gold from on high,  
Hearken to me!

“Light of the moon,  
Pearl of the sea,  
Gold of the land  
Here in my hand,  
I render to thee.

“Butterflies come!  
Carry us home,  
Gold of the gnome,  
Pearl of the sea.”

And as he sang, out of the east came a soft muttering of wings and a deep moving mass like a bright storm cloud. And out of the sun ran a long gold finger, and out of the moon a pale shivering finger of pearl, and touching the gold and the pearl, these became verily wings and not of dresses. Then before the Princess could scream more than once or the King say anything about cutting off heads, the bright cloud in the east became a myriad myriad of butterflies. And drawn by the falling flashing sun and by the faint falling moon and fanned by the million wings of his fellow creatures, Gammelyn sprang out from the palace wall on the crest of the butterfly wind, and flew away brighter and farther each moment; and followed by his myriad train of butterflies, he passed out of sight, and in that country was never heard of again.