

Gammer Gaffer

(A Ballad Of Gloucester)

By Madison Cawein

I

One night when trees were tumbled down,
And wild winds shook at sea the sail,
Old Gammer Gaffer, lean and brown,
Chuckled and whistled on her nail;
Then seized her broom and, mounting it,
Flew up the chimney with her cat;
All Dogtown bayed to see her flit,
The screech-owl shrieked, and, lightning-lit,
About her head flew black the bat.

II

Her crow-like body, humped and black,
Seemed part and portion of her broom;
The black cat, crouched upon her back,
Lit with its yellow eyes the gloom.
Towards Gloucester Town she took her flight,
And night grew wilder as she went;
The wind blew out the fisher's light,
And tore his sails in tatters white,
And strewed them through the firmament.

III

*Old shutters clapped and windows rapped,
And shingles shook as if in pain;
Her besom on each old door slapped
And flapped as, cloaked and conical-capped,
Whisked by old Gammer Gaffer's train.*

IV

To window-panes, where candle-light
Showed some good wife who sat alone,
She pressed her sharp face, skinny white,
And knocked with knuckled hands of bone:
Then croaked and mumbled, like the draught
That grumbles in the chimney-flue;
Or on the gables danced and laughed,

Her old cloak flapping as if daft,
While round her face her wild hair blew.

V

*Old gutters dripped and dead leaves skipped,
And wildly struck the village clock,
As off a shutter here she ripped,
Old Gammer! or like madness whipped
Around and 'round some weather-cock.*

VI

Then at one door she shook the latch,
And to a cranny set her chin
And croaked: "Hey! here's an egg to hatch.
Eh? Goodie Brown, come, take it in.—
I've news for ye! *Good news!* he! he!—
Your old man —*he's* gone down at sea.—
There's something, eh? —to hearten ye! —
Hey! what man now shall wear his shoes?"

VII

And, chuckling to herself, again
Around the house she rode her broom;
Then mounted to the weather-vane
And whirled and maundered to the gloom:
"Aye! weep, ye women! weep and wail!
'Twas *I* who wrought your good men's weird!
'Twas *I* who raised the Gloucester gale!
'Twas *I* who tattered shroud and sail,
And seized and drowned them, by my beard!"

VIII

*Old sign-boards squeaked and gables creaked.
And crazy gates closed with a bang,
As, parrot-beaked and lanthorn-cheeked,
Old Gammer round the belfry shrieked
And made its cracked old bell go clang*

IX

So round and round the old Cape Town
She whirled and whined as whines the wind;

Now this way blew her rag of gown,
Now that way, through the blackness blind.
And as she went she crowed and croaked.
And crooned some snatch of devil's verse,
While now and then her cat she stroked;
And, in a wink, all capped and cloaked,
Flew back to Dogtown with a curse.