Tom Hickathrift

An English Tale

Before the days of William the Conqueror there dwelt a man in the marsh of the Isle of Ely whose name was Thomas Hickathrift, a poor day labourer, but so stout that he could do two days' work in one. His one son he called by his own name, Thomas Hickathrift, and he put him to good learning, but the lad was none of the wisest, and indeed seemed to be somewhat soft, so he got no good at all from his teaching.

Tom's father died, and his mother being tender of him, kept him as well as she could. The slothful fellow would do nothing but sit in the chimney-corner, and eat as much at a time as would serve four or five ordinary men. And so much did he grow that when but ten years old he was already eight feet high, and his hand like a shoulder of mutton.

One day his mother went to a rich farmer's house to beg a bottle of straw for herself and Tom. "Take what you will," said the farmer, an honest charitable man. So when she got home she told Tom to fetch the straw, but he wouldn't and, beg as she might, he wouldn't till she borrowed him a cart rope. So off he went, and when he came to the farmer's, master and men were all a-trashing in the barn.

"I'm come for the straw," said Tom.

"Take as much as thou canst carry," said the farmer.

So Tom laid down his rope and began to make his bottle.

"Your rope is too short," said the farmer by way of a joke; but the joke was on Tom's side, for when he had made up his load there was some twenty hundred-weight of straw, and though they called him a fool for thinking he could carry the tithe of it, he flung it over his shoulder as if it had been a hundred-weight, to the great admiration of master and men.

Tom's strength being thus made known there was no longer any basking by the fire for him; every one would be hiring him to work, and telling him 't was a shame to live such a lazy life. So Tom seeing them wait on him as they did, went to work first with one, then with another. And one day a woodman desired his help to bring home a tree. Off went Tom and four men besides, and when they came to the tree they began to draw it into the cart with pulleys. At last Tom, seeing them unable to lift it, "Stand away, you fools," said he, and taking the tree, set it on one end and laid it in the cart. "Now," said he, "see what a man can do." "Marry, 't is true," said they, and the woodman asked what reward he'd take. "Oh, a stick for my mother's fire," said Tom; and espying a tree bigger than was in the cart, he laid it on his shoulders and went home with it as fast as the cart and six horses could draw it.

Tom now saw that he had more strength than twenty men, and began to be very merry, taking delight in company, in going to fairs and meetings, in seeing sports and pastimes. And at cudgels, wrestling, or throwing the hammer, not a man could stand against him, so that at last none durst go into the ring to wrestle with him, and his fame was spread more and more in the country.

Far and near he would go to any meetings, as football play or the like. And one day in a part of the country where he was a stranger, and none knew him, he stopped to watch the company at football play; rare sport it was; but Tom spoiled it all, for meeting the ball he took it such a kick that away it flew none could tell whither. They were angry with Tom

as you may fancy, but got nothing by that as Tom took hold of a big spar, and laid about with a will, so that though the whole country-side was up in arms against him, he cleared his way wherever he came.

It was late in the evening ere he could turn homeward, and on the road there met him four lusty rogues that had been robbing passengers all day. They thought they had a good prize in Tom, who was all alone, and made cocksure of his money.

"Stand and deliver!" said they.

"What should I deliver?" said Tom.

"Your money, sirrah," said they.

"You shall give me better words for it first," said Tom.

"Come, come, no more prating; money we want, and money we'll have before you stir."

"Is it so?" said Tom, "nay, then come and take it."

The long and the short of it was that Tom killed two of the rogues and grieviously wounded the other two, and took all their money, which was as much as two hundred pounds. And when he came home he made his old mother laugh with the story of how he served the football players and the four thieves.

But you shall see that Tom sometimes met his match. In wandering one day in the forest he met a lusty tinker that had a good staff on his shoulder, and a great dog to carry his bag and tools.

"Whence come you and whither are you going?" said Tom, "this is no highway."

"What's that to you?" said the tinker; "fools must needs be meddling."

"I'll make you know," said Tom, "before you and I part, what it is to me."

"Well," said the tinker, "I'm ready for a bout with any man, and I hear there is one Tom Hickathrift in the country of whom great things are told. I'd fain see him to have a turn with him."

"Ay," said Tom, "methinks he might be master with you. Anyhow, I am the man; what have you to say to me?"

"Why, verily, I'm glad we are so happily met."

"Sure, you do but jest," said Tom.

"Marry, I'm in earnest," said the tinker. "A match?" "'T is done." "Let me first get a twig," said Tom. "Ay," said the tinker, "hang him that would fight a man unarmed."

So Tom took a gate-rail for his staff, and at it they fell, the tinker at Tom, and Tom at the tinker, like two giants they laid on at each other. The tinker had a leathern coat on, and at every blow Tom gave the tinker his coat roared again, yet the tinker did not give way one inch. At last Tom gave him a blow on the side of his head which felled him.

"Now tinker where are you?" said Tom.

But the tinker being a nimble fellow, leapt up again, gave Tom a blow that made him reel again, and followed his blow with one on the other side that made Tom's neck crack again. So Tom flung down his weapon and yielded the tinker the better on it, took

him home to his house, where they nursed their bruises and from that day forth there was no stauncher pair of friends than they two.

Tom's fame was thus spread abroad till at length a brewer at Lynn, wanting a good lusty man to carry his beer to Wisbeach went to hire Tom, and promised him a new suit of clothes from top to toe, and that he should eat and drink of the best, so Tom yielded to be his man and his master told him what way he should go, for you must understand there was a monstrous giant who kept part of the marsh-land, so that none durst go that way.

So Tom went every day to Wisbeach a good twenty miles by the road. 'T was a wearisome journey thought Tom and he soon found that the way kept by the giant was nearer by half. Now Tom had got more strength than ever, being well kept as he was and drinking so much strong ale as he did. One day, then, as he was going to Wisbeach, without saying anything to his master or any of his fellow servants, he resolved to take the nearest road or to lose his life; as they say, to win horse or lose saddle. Thus resolved, he took the near road, flinging open the gates for his cart and horses to go through. At last the giant spied him, and came up speedily, intending to take his beer for a prize.

He met Tom like a lion as though he would have swallowed him. "Who gave you authority to come this way?" roared he. "I'll make you an example for all rogues under the sun. See how many heads hang on yonder tree. Yours shall hang higher than all the rest for a warning."

But Tom made him answer, "A fig in your teeth you shall not find me like one of them, traitorly rogue that you are."

The giant took these words in high disdain, and ran into his cave to fetch his great club, intending to dash out Tom's brains at the first blow.

Tom knew not what to do for a weapon; his whip would be but little good against a monstrous beast twelve foot in length and six foot about the waist. But whilst the giant went for his club, bethinking him of a very good weapon, he made no more ado, but took his cart, turned it upside down, and took axle-tree and wheel for shield and buckler. And very good weapons they were found!

Out came the giant and began to stare at Tom. "You are like to do great service with those weapons," roared he. "I have here a twig that will beat you and your wheel to the ground." Now this twig was as thick as some mileposts are, but Tom was not daunted for all that, though the giant made at him with such force that the wheel cracked again. But Tom gave as good as he got, taking the giant such a weighty blow on the side of the head that he reeled again. "What," said Tom, "are you drunk with my strong beer already?"

So at it they went, Tom laying such huge blows at the giant, down whose face sweat and blood ran together, so that, being fat and foggy and tired with the long fighting, he asked Tom would he let him drink a little? "Nay, nay," said Tom, "my mother did not teach me such wit; who'd be a fool then?" And seeing the giant beginning to weary and fail in his blows, Tom thought best to make hay whilst the sun shone, and, laying on as fast as though he had been mad, he brought the giant to the ground. In vain were the giant's roars and prayers and promises to yield himself and be Tom's servant. Tom laid at him till he was dead, and then, cutting off his head, he went into the cave, and found a great store of silver and gold, which made his heart to leap.

So he loaded his cart, and after delivering his beer at Wisbeach, he came home and told his master what had befallen him. And on the morrow he and his master and more of the towns-folk of Lynn set out for the giant's cave. Tom showed them the head, and what

silver and gold there was in the cave, and not a man but leapt for joy, for the giant was a great enemy to all the country.

The news was spread all up and down the country-side how Tom Hickathrift had killed the giant. And well was he that could run to see the cave; all the folk made bonfires for joy, and if Tom was respected before, he was much more so now. With common consent he took possession of the cave and every one said, had it been twice as much, he would have deserved it. So Tom pulled down the cave, and built himself a brave house. The ground that the giant kept by force for himself, Tom gave part to the poor for their common land, and part he turned into good wheat-land to keep himself and his old mother, Jane Hickathrift. And now he was become the chiefest man in the country-side; 't was no longer plain Tom, but Mr. Hickathrift, and he was held in due respect I promise you. He kept men and maids and lived most bravely; made him a park to keep deer, and time passed with him happily in his great house till the end of his days.