I am Gimpel the fool. I don't think myself a fool. On the contrary. But that's what folks call me. They gave me the name while I was still in school. I had seven names in all: imbecile, donkey, flax-head, dope, glump, nimny, and fool. The last name stuck. What did my foolishness consist of? I was easy to take in. They said, "Gimpel, you know the rabbi's wife has been brought to childbed?" So I skipped school. Well, it turned out to be a lie. How was I supposed to know? She hadn't had a big belly. But I never looked at her belly. Was that really so foolish? The gang laughed and heehawed, stomped and danced and chanted a good-night prayer. And instead of the raisins they give when a woman's lying in, they stuffed my hand full of goat turds. I was no weakling. If I slapped someone he'd see all the way to Cracow. But I'm really not a slugger by nature. I think to myself: Let it pass. So they take advantage of me. I was coming home from school and heard a dog barking. I'm not afraid of dogs, but of course I never want to start up with them. One of them may be mad, and if he bites there's not a Tartar in the world who can help you. So I made tracks. Then I looked around and saw the whole market place wild with laughter. It was no dog at all but Wolf-Leib the thief. How was I supposed to know it was he? It sounded like a howling bitch.

When the pranksters and leg-pullers found that I was easy to fool, every one of them tried his luck with me. "Gimpel, the czar is coming to Frampol; Gimpel, the moon fell down in Turbeen; Gimpel, little Hodel Furpiece found a treasure behind the bathhouse." And I like a golem1 believed everyone. In the first place, everything is possible, as it is written in The Wisdom of the Fathers, I've forgotten just how. Second, I had to believe when the whole town came down on me! If I ever dared to say, "Ah, you're kidding!" there was trouble. People got angry. "What do you mean? You want to call everyone a liar?" What was I to do? I believed them, and I hope at least that did them some good.

I was an orphan. My grandfather who brought me up was already bent toward the grave. So they turned me over to a baker, and what a time they gave me there! Every woman or girl who came to bake a batch of noodles had to fool me at least once: "Gimpel, there's a fair in Heaven; Gimpel, the rabbit gave birth to a calf in the seventh month; Gimpel, a cow flew over the roof and laid brass eggs." A student from the yeshiva came once to buy a roll, and he said, "You, Gimpel, while you stand here scraping with your baker's shovel the Messiah has come. The dead have arisen." "What do you mean?" I said. "I heard no one blowing the ram's horn!" He said, "Are you deaf!" And all began to cry, "We heard it, we heard!" Then in came Rietze the candle-dipper and called out in her hoarse voice, "Gimpel, your father and mother have stood up from the grave. They're looking for you."

I told the truth, I knew very well that nothing of the sort had happened, but all the same, as folks were talking, I threw on my wool vest and went out. Maybe something had happened. What did I stand to lose by looking? Well, what a cat music

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1golem According to Jewish legend, a man artificially created by cabalistic rites; a robot or automaton.
went up! And then I took a vow to believe nothing more. But that was no go either. They confused me so that I didn't know the big end from the small.

I went to the rabbi to get some advice. He said, "It is written, better to be a fool all your days than for one hour to be evil. You are not a fool. They are the fools. For he who causes his neighbor to feel shame loses Paradise himself." Nevertheless, the rabbi's daughter took me in. As I left the rabbinical court she said, "Have you kissed the wall yet?" I said, "No, what for?" She answered, "It's the law; you've got to do it after every visit." Well, there didn't seem to be any harm in it. And she burst out laughing. It was a fine trick. She put one over on me, all right.

I wanted to go off to another town, but then everyone got busy matchmaking, and they were after me so they nearly tore my coat tails off. They talked at me and talked until I got water on the ear. She was no chaste maiden, but they told me she was virgin pure. She had a limp, and they said it was deliberate, from coyness. She had a bastard, and they told me the child was her little brother. I cried, "You're wasting your time. I'll never marry that whore." But they said indignantly, "What a way to talk! Aren't you ashamed of yourself. We can take you to the rabbi and have you fined for giving her a bad name." I saw then that I wouldn't escape them so easily and I thought: They're set on making me their butt. But when you're married the husband, the master, and if that's all right with her it's agreeable to me too. Besides, you can't pass through life uncathed, nor expect to.

I went to her clay house, which was built on the sand, and the whole gang, holloering and chorusing, came after me. They acted like bear-baiters. When we came to the well they stopped all the same. They were afraid to start anything with Elka. Her mouth would open as if it were on a hinge, and she had a fierce tongue. I entered the house. Lines were strung from wall to wall and clothes were drying. Barefoot she stood by the tub, doing the wash. She was dressed in a worn hand-me-down gown of peppered chick-peas. I ate and drank the well they stopped all the same. They were afraid to start anything with Elka. Her mouth would open as if it were on a hinge, and she had a fierce tongue. I entered the house. Lines were strung from wall to wall and clothes were drying. Barefoot she stood by the tub, doing the wash. She was dressed in a worn hand-me-down gown of peppered chick-peas. I ate and drank. The screams rose to the welkin.

The thing to do was to go to the house of prayer to repeat psalms, and that was what I did.

The townsfolk liked that, all right. I stood in a corner saying psalms and prayers, and they shook their heads at me. "Pray, pray!" they told me. "Prayer never made any woman pregnant." One of the congregation put a straw to my mouth and said, "Hay for the cows." There was something to that too, by God!

She gave birth to a boy. Friday at the synagogue the sexton stood up before the Ark, and announced, "The wealthy Reb Gimpel invites the congregation to a feast in honor of the birth of a son." The whole house of prayer pounded on the reading table, and announced, "The wealthy Reb Gimpel invites the congregation to a feast in honor of the birth of a son." The whole house of prayer rang with laughter. My face was flaming. But there was nothing I could do. After all, I was the one responsible for the circumcision honors and rituals.

Half the town came running. You couldn't wedge another soul in. Women brought peppered chick-peas, and there was a keg of beer from the tavern. I ate and drank and I named the boy after my father, may he rest in peace. When all were gone and they shook their heads at me. "Pray, pray!" they told me. "Prayer never made any woman pregnant." One of the congregation put a straw to my mouth and said, "Hay for the cows." There was something to that too, by God!

She was no chaste maiden, but they told me she had a bastard, and they told me the child was her little brother. I cried, "You're wasting your time. I'll never marry that whore." But they said indignantly, "What a way to talk! Aren't you ashamed of yourself. We can take you to the rabbi and have you fined for giving her a bad name." I saw then that I wouldn't escape them so easily and I thought: They're set on making me their butt. But when you're married the husband, the master, and if that's all right with her it's agreeable to me too. Besides, you can't pass through life uncathed, nor expect to.

I thought: No bread will ever be baked from this dough. But ours is not a poor town. They consented to everything and proceeded with the wedding. It so happened that there was a dysentery epidemic at the time. The ceremony was held at the cemetery gates, near the little corpse-washing hut. The fellows got drunk. While the marriage contract was being drawn up I heard the most pious high rabbi ask, "Is the bride a widow or a divorced woman?" And the sexton's wife answered for her, "Both a widow and divorced." It was a black moment for me. But what was I to do, run away from under the marriage canopy?

There was singing and dancing. An old granny danced opposite me, hugging a bride's parents. The schoolboys threw burrs, as on Tishe b'Av\footnote{Tishe b'Av A Jewish fast day commemorating the destruction of the Temple, celebrated on the ninth day of the month of Ab.} fast day. There were a lot of gifts after the sermon: a noodle board, a kneading trough, a bucket, brooms, ladles, household articles galore. Then I took a look and saw two strapping young men carrying a crib. "What do we need this for?" I asked. So they said, "Don't rack your brains about it. It's all right, it'll come in handy." I realized I was going to be rooked. Take it another way though, what did I stand to lose? I reflected: I'll see what comes of it. A whole town can't go altogether crazy.
that—why frighten a little swallow, I thought. All right then, I went back to the bakery and stretched out on a sack of flour and till morning I never shut an eye. I shivered as if I had had malaria. "Enough of being a donkey," I said to myself. "Gimpel isn’t going to be a sucker all his life. There’s a limit even to the foolishness of a fool like Gimpel."

In the morning I went to the rabbi to get advice, and it made a great commotion in the town. They sent the beadle for Elka right away. She came, carrying the child. And what do you think she did? She denied it, denied everything, bone and stone! "He’s out of his head," she said. "I know nothing of dreams or divinations." They yelled at her, warned her, hammered on the table, but she stuck to her guns: it was a false accusation, she said.

The butchers and the horse-traders took her part. One of the lads from the slaughterhouse came by and said to me, "We’ve got our eye on you, you’re a marked man." Meanwhile, the child started to bear down and soiled itself. In the rabbinical court there was an Ark of the Covenant, and they couldn’t allow that, so they sent Elka away.

I said to the rabbi, "What shall I do?"
"You must divorce her at once," said he.
"And what if she refuses?" I asked.
He said, "You must serve the divorce. That’s all you’ll have to do."
I said, "Well, all right, Rabbi. Let me think about it."
"There’s nothing to think about," said he. "You mustn’t remain under the same roof with her."
"And if I want to see the child?" I asked.
"Let her go, the harlot," said he, "and her brood of bastards with her."
The verdict he gave was that I mustn’t even cross her threshold—never again, as long as I should live.

During the day it didn’t bother me so much. I thought: It was bound to happen, the abscess had to burst. But at night when I stretched out upon the sacks I felt it all very bitterly. A longing took me, for her and for the child. I wanted to be angry, but that’s my misfortune exactly, I don’t have it in me to be really angry. In the first place—this was how my thoughts went—there’s bound to be a slip sometimes. You can’t live without errors. Probably that lad who was with her led her on and gave her presents and what not, and women are often long on hair and short on sense, and so he got around her. And then since she denies it so, maybe I was only seeing things? Hallucinations do happen. You see a figure or a mannikin or something, but when you come up close it’s nothing, there’s not a thing there. And if that’s so, I’m doing her an injustice. And when I got so far in my thoughts I started to weep. I sobbed so that I wet the flour where I lay. In the morning I went to the rabbi and told him that I had made a mistake. The rabbi wrote on with his quill, and he said that if that were so he would have to reconsider the whole case. Until he had finished I wasn’t to go near my wife, but I might send her bread and money by messenger.

III

Nine months passed before all the rabbis could come to an agreement. Letters went back and forth. I hadn’t realized that there could be so much erudition about a matter like this.
Gimpel the Fool

Meanwhile, Elka gave birth to still another child, a girl this time. On the Sabbath I went to the synagogue and invoked a blessing on her. They called me up to the Torah, and I named the child for my mother-in-law—may she rest in peace. The lusts and loudmouths of the town who came into the bakery gave me a going over. All Frampol refreshed its spirits because of my trouble and grief. However, I resolved that I would always believe what I was told. What's the good of not believing? Today it's your wife you don't believe; tomorrow it's God Himself you won't take stock in.

By an apprentice who was her neighbor I sent her daily a corn or a wheat loaf, or a piece of pastry, rolls or bagels, or, when I got the chance, a slab of pudding, a slice of honeycake, or wedding strudel—whatever came my way. The apprentice was a good-hearted lad, and more than once he added something on his own. He had formerly annoyed me a lot, plucking my nose and digging me in the ribs, but when he started to be a visitor to my house he became kind and friendly. "Hey, you, Gimpel," he said to me, "You have a very decent little wife and two fine kids. You don't deserve them."

"But the things people say about her," I said.

"Well, they have long tongues," he said, "and nothing to do with them but babble. Ignore it as you ignore the cold of last winter."

One day the rabbit sent for me and said, "Are you certain, Gimpel, that you were wrong about your wife?"

I said, "I'm certain."

"Why, but look here! You yourself saw it."

"It must have been a shadow," I said.

"The shadow of what?"

"Just of one of the beans, I think."

"You can go home then. You owe things to the Yanover rabbi. He found an obscure reference in Maimonides that favored you."

I seized the rabbit's hand and kissed it.

I wanted to run home immediately. It's no small thing to be separated for so long a time from wife and child. Then I reflected: I'd better go back to work now, and go home in the evening. I said nothing to anyone, although as far as my heart was concerned it was like one of the Holy Days. The women teased and twitted me as they continued it was like one of the Holy Days. The moon went out all at once. It was utterly black, and I trembled. My heart started to pound as though it were the heart of a criminal. I felt no fear, but my heart went thump! thump! Well, no drawing back.

As I approached the house my heart started to pound as though it were the heart of a criminal. I felt no fear, but my heart went thump! thump! Well, no drawing back.

Suddenly my wife took sick. It began with a trifle, a little growth upon the breast. I have forgotten to say that by this time I had a bakery of my own and in reference in Maimonides that favored you."

"What lad?" my wife answered.

"Where," I asked, "is the lad?"

"What lad?" my wife answered.

"What do you mean?" I said. "The apprentice. You were sleeping with him."

"The things I have dreamed this night and the night before," she said, "may they come true and lay you low, body and soul! An evil spirit has taken root in you and dazzles your sight." She screamed out, "You hateful creature! You moon calf! You shrew! You uncouth man! Get out, or I'll scream all Frampol out of bed!"

Before I could get him, his brother sprang out from behind the oven and struck me a blow on the back of the head. I thought he had broken my neck. I felt that something about me was deeply wrong, and I said, "Don't make a scandal. All that's needed now is that people should accuse me of raising spooks and dybbuks." For that was what she had meant. "No one will touch bread of my baking."

In short, I somehow calmed her.

"Well," she said, "that's enough. Lie down, and be shattered by wheels."

Next morning I called the apprentice aside. "Listen here, Gimpel," she said to me, "You have a very decent little wife and two fine kids. You don't deserve them."

As I approached the house my heart started to pound as though it were the heart of a criminal. I felt no fear, but my heart went thump! thump! Well, no drawing back. I quietly lifted the latch and went in. Elka was asleep. I looked at the infant's cradle.

1 Maimonides Spanish rabbi, physician, and philosopher (1135-1204).
Frampol was considered to be something of a rich man. Daily the healer came, and
every witch doctor in the neighborhood was brought. They decided to use leeches,
late. Before she died she called me to her bed and said, “Forgive me, Gimpel.”

“I said, “What is there to forgive? You have been a good and faithful wife.”

“Woe, Gimpel!” she said. “It was ugly how I deceived you all these years. I want
to go clean to my Maker, and so I have to tell you that the children are not yours.”

If I had been clouted on the head with a piece of wood it couldn’t have bewildered
me more.

“How are they?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” she said. “There were a lot... but they’re not yours.” And as she
spoke she tossed her head to the side, her eyes turned glassy, and it was all up with
Elka. On her whitened lips there remained a smile.

I imagined that, dead as she was, she was saying, “I deceived Gimpel. That was the
meaning of my brief life.”

IV

One night, when the period of mourning was done, as I lay dreaming on the flour
sacks, there came the Spirit of Evil himself and said to me, “Gimpel, why do you
sleep?”

I said, “What should I be doing? Eating kreplech?”

“The whole world deceives you,” he said, “and you ought to deceive the world in
your turn.”

“How can I deceive all the world?” I asked him.

He answered, “You might accumulate a bucket of urine every day and at night
pour it into the dough. Let the sages of Frampol eat filth.”

“What about judgment in the world to come?” I said.

“There is no world to come,” he said. “They’ve sold you a bill of goods and talked
you into believing you carried a cat in your belly. What nonsense!”

“Well then,” I said, “and is there a God?”

He answered, “There is no God either.”

“What?” I said, “is there, then?”

“A thick mire.”

He stood before my eyes with a goatish beard and horn, long-toothed, and with a
flour sack and nearly broke a rib. Then it happened that I had to answer the call of
the oven, on a pile of rags. Well, Gimpel, I thought, you’ve revenged

himself. Now I can disappear.

Going from place to place, eating at strange tables, it often happens that I spin

a yarn—improbable things that could never have happened—about devils, magicians,
windmills, and the like. The children run after me, calling, “Grandfather, tell us a
story.” Sometimes they ask for particular stories, and I try to please them. A fat young

boy once said to me, “Grandfather, it’s the same story you told us before.” That led me
to a feeling that, dead as she was, she was saying, “I deceived Gimpel. That was the
meaning of my brief life.”

...—in the neighborhood was brought. They decided to use leeches,

as at our first encounter, but her face is shining and her eyes are as radiant
as the eyes of a saint, and she speaks outlandish words to me, strange things. When
I awakened I felt her lips and taste the salt of her tears.

No doubt the world is entirely an imaginary world, but it is only once removed from
the true world. At the door of the hovel where I live, there stands the plank on which

or placed in a case and attached to the doorpost of the home by Biblical command.

kreplech Yiddish: small casings of dough filled with ground meat, boiled, and usually served in soup.
the dead are taken away. The gravedigger Jew has his spade ready. The grave waits
and the worms are hungry; the shrouds are prepared—I carry them in my beggar's
sack. Another shnorrer7 is waiting to inherit my bed of straw. When the time comes
I will go joyfully. Whatever may be there, it will be real, without complication,
without ridicule, without deception. God be praised: there even Gimpel cannot
be deceived.

[1953]
Translated by
SAUL BELLOW

7. a Yiddish person who begs or sponges off
others.