

WITCHCRAFT AT PENZANCE

AT the Morrab Library, Penzance, is preserved a small pamphlet, probably unique, containing extraordinary details of an alleged case of witchcraft in that town. The pamphlet was printed in London by George Croom in 1686, and is bound up with a print of Matthew Hopkins of Manningtree, Essex, "the celebrated witch-finder", and some 18th Century MS. notes on witchcraft outside Cornwall. It bears the armorial bookplate of James Comerford and was acquired by W. C. Borlase, M.P., in 1882.

The title page reads "A true account of a strange and wonderful relation of one John Tonken, of Pensans in Cornwall, said to be bewitched by some women, two of which on suspicion are committed to prison. He vomitting up several pins, pieces of walnut-shels, an ear of rye, with a straw to it half a yard long and rushes of the same length, which are kept to be shown at the next Assizes for the said County".

The full text is as follows:—

"Very strange are the delusions of Satan, to get the souls and bodies of men into his possession; he leaving no ways or means unattempted, to accomplish his ends: How dreadful then is it for such who give up themselves voluntarily to do his druggery, and sell their souls to eternal punishment, for a little momentary pleasure, or to fulfil their own lusts here, and such may all those truly be said to be, who are guilty of witchcraft, which detestable sin, God himself abominates, and hath expressed in Holy Writ, Thou shalt not suffer a witch or wizard to live in the land. Of which number, these two women committed as aforesaid, are supposed to be; as the ensuing discourse will make out.

"One John Tonken, of Pensans, near the Mount in Cornwall, about 15 or 16 years of age, was in April last strangely taken with sudden fits; and on the 4th May 1686 as he lay in bed, there appeared to him a woman in a blue jerkin and red petticoat, with yellow and green patches, and told him, that he would not be well before he had brought up nutshells, pins and nails; which the boy afterwards related to several people that were at his chamber, though none did see or hear the apparition, but himself: soon after the lad was taken with fits of striving, or yoaking, insomuch, that two men could scarce hold him, and after several fits, he brought up three pins, and half a walnut-shell and in few days after, he brought up three walnut-shells, and several pins, some

of which were crooked. The woman very often appeared to him, sometimes in the shape as before; at other times like a cat; whereupon the boy would shriek, and cry out that he would not see her, laying his hands over his eyes and mouth, and would say with a loud voice, she is putting things into my mouth, she will choak me, she will poyson me. At other times he would say I will not be tempted by thee, and in the name of Jesus, I defie thee and all thy works: for a while he would ly as dead, and on a sudden he would spring from the bed, three or four foot high, from between two men that usually sat upon the bed by him. At another time he said the woman told him he had straws in his belly, and in a short time after he brought up four or five straws, as also an ear of Rye, with a straw to it half a yard long; and for two or three days successively he brought up great quantitys of straws and rushes, some of them being a yard long, with broad knots in them: the pins he brought up were in all 16 or 17 and as many straws and rushes as would fill the pole of a mans hat, if they were thrown in somewhat lose, one without a head and one turned like a fish-hook; the woman another time appeared to him and told him he should bring up nails, and that as they were insensibly put into him, so he should in like manner bring them out, and in few hours after, the boy cried out he was prick'd in the heel, the people that were then present turned the bedcloaths off, and found a new threepeny nail fast to his heel, and another in the bed; he also brought up a piece of dry bramble, and several pieces of flat sticks, which put together, made the form of a breeting needle, such as the fishermen make their nets with. Some persons to be satisfied of the truth of this, came to him, and put their fingers into his mouth to search if he had any pins or rushes, thinking he might put a trick on them, but found none, though some came every day from him. On the 10th of May, was his violent fit, when he hardly had any cessation from his pulls or throws for several hours, he started very much, and being asked what the woman had said to him, replied she told him she would kill him, if it were in her power; but he said he hoped God would not permit her. In one of his staring fits, a person of note observing his eyes to be fixed in the thatch of the house, thrust his sword into the thatch twice, then the boy cryed she is gone into the corner like a mouse: at that time he brought up a pin very rusty, and a little bowed, which was took up and kept. The last thing that he brought up, was a piece of a Beeting needle, half an Inch broad, and an inch and half long, with two sharp points like pins, one at each end, which things have caused great admiration: He would often cry out she had put poyson into his mouth, and call upon one Edward Plimrose, who was his uncle, to catch her, saying she was going out of the window. Sometimes he would say to her, when shall I be well? Make me well I will give thee five shillings, I'll give thee five pound; and then turning his eyes to the people, would say, she will not tell me when I shall be well. Another time he said to her tell me your name, and where you do dwell? Then turning to the people, would say, the old witch will neither tell me her name, nor where she dwells. The last time there appeared to him three women, whereat he cried out, what a

confederacy! What you old witch more confederates, and then she bad him farewell, and said she would trouble him no more; and two days after, the boy was pretty well again, and goes abroad with crutches. Of this, affidavit hath been made before a justice by several persons and they are sent to Lancelton Goal, for witchcraft, two old women, one Jane Noal, alias Nickless, and the other Elizabeth, or more commonly Betty Seeze. We live in hopes they will be found out at the next Assizes, and so receive a reward due to their merits. To the truth hereof we have hereunto set our hands.

Peter Jenken, Mayor. John Geose (for Grose), Justice”.

Absurd and repulsive as this narrative is, it merits reprinting as an example of the depths of superstition to which responsible public figures could fall in 17th Century Cornwall. One can only hope that the two unfortunate old women met with a more enlightened Judge and Jury at Launceston Assizes.

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