

The Mayor of Gantick

By Quiller-Couch

One of these days I hope to write a treatise on the Mayors of Cornwall—dignitaries whose pleasant fame is now night, remembered only in some neat by-word or saying of the country people. Thus you may hear, now and again, of “the Mayor of Falmouth, who thanked God when the town gaol was enlarged,” “the Mayor of Market Jew, sitting in his own light,” or “the Mayor of Calenich, who walked two miles to ride one.” But the one whose history perplexed me most, till I heard the truth from an eye-witness, was “the mad Mayor of Gantick, who was wise for a long day, and then died of it.”

It was an old tin-streamer who told me—a thin fellow with a shrivelled mouth, and a back bent two-double. And I heard it on the very hearthstone of the Mayor’s cottage, one afternoon, as we sat and smoked in the shadow of the crumbling mud wall, with a square of blue sky for roof, and for carpet a tangle of brambles, nettles, and rank grass.

It seems that the village of Gantick, half a mile away, was used once in every year to purge itself of evil. To this end the villagers prepared a huge dragon of pasteboard and marched out with it to a sandy common, since cut up by tin-works, but still known as Dragon’s Moor. Here they would choose one of their number to be Mayor, and submit to him all questions of conscience, and such cases of notorious evil living as the law failed to provide for. Summary justice waited on all his decisions; and as the village wag was usually chosen for the post, you may guess that the horse-play was rough at times. When this was over, and the public conscience purified, the company fell on the pasteboard dragon with sticks and whacked him into small pieces, which they buried in a small hollow called Dragon Pit; and so returned gladly to their homes to start on another twelve months of sin.

This feast of purification fell always on the 12th of July; and in the heyday of its celebration there lived in this cottage a widow-woman and her only son, a demented man about forty years old. There was no harm in the poor creature, who worked at the Lanihorne slate-quarries, six miles off, as a “hollibubber”—that is to say, in carting away the refuse slate. Every morning he walked to his work, mumbling to himself as he went; and though the children followed him at times, hooting and flinging stones, they grew tired at last, finding that he never resented it. His mother—a tall, silent woman with an inscrutable face—had supper ready for him when he returned, and often was forced to feed him, while he unlocked his tongue and babbled over the small adventures of the day. He was not one of those gifted idiots who hear voices in the wind and know the language of the wild birds. His talk was merely imbecile; and, for the rest, he had large grey eyes, features of that regularity which we call Greek, and stood six foot two in his shoes.

One hot morning—it was the 12th of July—he was starting for his work when an indescribable hubbub sounded up the road, and presently came by the whole rabble of Gantick with cow-horns and instruments of percussion, and in their midst the famous dragon—all green, with fiery, painted eyes, and a long tongue of red flannel. Behind it the prisoners were escorted—a pale woman or two with dazed, terrified eyes, an old man suspected of egg-stealing, a cow addicted to trespass, and so on.

The Mayor was not chosen yet, this ceremony being deferred by rule till the crowd reached Dragon's Moor. But drawing near the cottage door and catching sight of the half-witted man with his foot on the threshold, a village wit called out and proposed that they should take "the Mounster" "(as he was called) along with them for Mayor.

It hit the mob's humour, and they cheered. The Mounster's mother, standing in the doorway, went white as if painted.

"Man in the lump's a hateful animal," she said to herself, hoarsely. "Come indoors, Jonathan, an' let 'em go by."

"Come an' rule over us," the crowd invited him, and a gleam of proud delight woke in his silly face.

"The heat—his head won't stand it." The woman looked up at the cloudless sky. "Far God's sake take your fun elsewhere!" she cried.

The women who were led to judgment looked at her stupidly. They too suffered, without understanding, the heavy sport of men. At last one said—

"Old woman, let him come. We'll have more mercy from a mazed man."

"Sister, you've been loose, they tell me," answered the old woman, "an' must eat the bitter fruit o't. But my son's an innocent. Jonathan, they'll look for you at the works."

"There's prouder work for me 'pon Dragon's Moor," the Mounster decided, with smiling eyes. "Come along, mother, an' see me exalted."

The crowd bore him off at their head, and the din broke out again. The new Mayor strutted among them with lifted chin and a radiant face. He thought it glorious. His mother ran into the cottage, fetched a bottle and followed after the dusty tail of the procession. Once, as they were passing a running stream, she halted and filled the bottle carefully, emptying it again and again until the film outside the glass was to her liking. Then she followed again, and came to Dragon's Moor.

They sat the Mayor on a mound, took off his hat, placed a crown on his head and a broomstick in his hand, and brought him the cases to try.

The first was a grey mare, possessed (they alleged) with a devil, Her skin hung like a sack on her bones.

"'Tis Eli Thoms' mare. What's to be done to cure her?" they asked.

"Let Eli Thoms buy a comb, an' comb his mare's tail while she eats her feed. So Eli 'll know if 'tis the devil or no that steals oats from his manger."

They applauded his wisdom and brought forward the woman who had pleaded just now with his mother.

"Who made her?" he asked, having listened to the charge.

"God, 'tis to be supposed."

"God makes no evil"

"The Devil, then."

"Then whack the Devil"

They fell on the pasteboard dragon and belaboured him. The sun poured down on the Mayor's throne; and his mother, who sat by his right hand wondering at his sense, gave him water to drink from the bottle. They brought a third case—a boy who had been caught torturing a cow. He had taken a saw, and tried to saw off one of her horns while she was tethered in her stall.

The Mayor leapt up from his seat.

“Kill him!” he shouted, “take him off and kill him!” His face was twisted with passion, and he lifted his stick. The crowd fell back for a second, but the old woman leant forward and touched her son softly on the leg. He stopped short: the anger died out of his face, and he shivered.

“No,” he said, “I was wrong, naybours. The boy is mad, I think; an’ ’tis a terrible lot, to be mad. This is the Devil’s doing, out o’ doubt. Beat the Devil.”

“Simme,” said one in the crowd, “the sins o’ Gantick be wearin’ out the smoky man at a terrible rate.”

“Ay,” answered another, “His Naughtiness bain’t ekal to Gantick.” And this observation was the original of a proverb, still repeated—“As naughty as Gantick, where the Devil struck for shorter hours.”

There was no cruelty that day on Dragon’s Moor. All the afternoon the mad Mayor sat in the sun’s eye and gave judgment, while his mother from time to time wiped away the froth that gathered on his lips, and moistened them with water from her bottle. From first to last she never spoke a word, but sat with a horror in her eyes, and watched the flushed cheeks of this grown-up, bearded son. And all the afternoon the men of Gantick brayed the Devil into shreds.

I said there was no cruelty on Dragon’s Moor that day. But at sundown the Mayor turned to his mother and said—

“We’ve been over-hasty, mother. We ought to ha’ found out who made the Devil what he is.” At last the sun dropped; a shadow fell on the brown moors and crept up the mound where the mother and son sat. The brightness died out of the Mayor’s face.

Three minutes after, he flung up his hands and cried, “Mother—my head, my head!”

She rose, still without a word, pulled down his arms, slipped one within her own, and led him away to the road. The crowd did not interfere; they were burying the broken dragon, with shouts and rough play.

A woman followed them to the road, and tried to clasp the Mayor’s knees as he staggered.

His mother beat her away.

“Off wi’ you!” she cried; “ ’tis your reproach he’s bearin’.”

She helped him slowly home. In the shadow of the cottage the inspired look that he had worn all day returned for a moment. Then a convulsion took him, casting him on the floor.

At nine o’clock he died, with his head on her lap.

She closed his eyes, smoothed the wrinkles on his tired face, and sat watching him for some time. At length she lifted and laid him on the deal table at frill length, bolted the door, put the heavy shutter on the low window, and began to light the fire.

For fuel she had a heap of peat-turves and some sticks. Having lit it, she set a crock of water to warm, and undressed the man slowly. Then, the water being ready, she washed and laid him out, chafing his limbs and talking to herself all the while.

“Fair, straight legs,” she said; “beautiful body that leapt in my side, forty years back, and thrilled me! How proud I was! Why did God make you beautiful?”

All night she sat caressing him. And the smoke of the peat-turves, finding no exit and no draught to carry them up the chimney, crept around and killed her quietly beside her son.