



Crime and Punishment

Castle Eaton

A Dreadful Murder 1893

At the Swindon Police Court on Saturday, John Sims, a labourer about 60 years of age, living at Water Eaton, near Cricklade, was charged with the murder of Joseph Lanfear, a child between three and four years of age, whose parents reside in a house adjoining prisoner's. After hearing a statement from Supt Collett, prisoner was remanded till Monday. During the proceedings, which were purely formal, he preserved a most composed demeanour, and declined to say anything in his defence.

The Inquest

The inquest took place on Saturday afternoon at Castle Eaton. The first witness was Emily Lanfear, mother of deceased. On Friday morning, between nine and ten o'clock, prisoner walked up the high road in company with the child, and returned a quarter of an hour afterwards alone. She asked him what had become of her boy, and he replied, "I've cut off his head and put him in the ditch, and that is where you will find him." Witness thought he was talking nonsense, but he assured her what he said was the truth, and then went into his cottage and sat down. Witness's husband ran up the road, followed by prisoner's wife. On the return of the latter, witness went into prisoner's house, and asked him if he had killed the child; but he said nothing beyond that he had killed it, and supposed he should be hanged. There had never been a quarrel of any kind between her family and the prisoner's and the latter had shown much partiality for the deceased. He was always a polite, civil man, with a comfortable home and everything that a person in his station could wish for. She had no idea what was the motive of the crime; she had never seen any marks of insanity in him. He was certainly not the worse for drink when he went out with the child.

Zacchaeus Lanfear spoke of finding the body near the spot prisoner had spoken of to Mrs Lanfear. The head was completely severed from the body, and placed behind it.

Dr Langley, of Cricklade described the condition of the body, and said the head was severed by some sharp instrument between the first and second vertebrae. The knife produced (stained with blood) would make such a cut, and the division of the bones could easily be effected by a man of ordinary strength. There were no other marks of violence of any kind on deceased. He had had prisoner under his care for various slight ailments, but he had never struck him as a man of unsound mind. During the day or two before the crime he had had a touch of indigestion, and that would produce depression, which might or might not induce a homicidal or suicidal tendency.

The Coroner, in summing up, commented on the clearness of the evidence and on the deliberate manner of prisoner before and after the crime. The question of his sanity must be left to a higher tribunal, and from the facts before him he could do no other than recommend the jury to return a verdict of wilful murder against prisoner. The jury concurred, and the verdict was entered accordingly.

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