



MARY KENNEY MURDER OF A FEMALE LUNATIC

On Monday last an inquest was held at the Fisherton House Lunatic Asylum, before R. M. Wilson, Esq., Coroner, on the body of Mary Kenney, a criminal lunatic, between 30 and 40 years of age, who met her death at the hands of Catherine Clarke, another female lunatic aged about 17 years, under the circumstances detailed in the following evidence:-

Dr. W.C. Finch deposed that he is resident proprietor of a house for the reception of lunatics, at Fisherton, and that he has in his custody a number of criminal lunatics, who are detained under a warrant from the Secretary of State. The deceased was one of these, and was a lunatic without intervals of sanity. Catherine Clarke was also a lunatic under his care, and was insane without intervals.

My. Henry Schroder stated that he is one of the medical superintendents at the Asylum, and that the criminal lunatics are under his charge. Shortly after eight o'clock on Saturday morning, he was called to the Criminal Ward No. 8, as he was told that something serious had occurred. On arriving at the ward he found Mary Kenney lying dead in the airing court. She had received two or three severe blows on the forehead, one over the right eye, one on the side of the head, and several on the back of the head. Clarke was passive at this time. Witness asked her how she came to do it, and she said something about the Holy Ghost, but he could not say exactly what it was.

Eliza Day stated that she is the female attendant of the No. 8 ward, of which Clarke and the deceased were the inmates. On Saturday morning Clarke broke a window in the room, and as breakfast was preparing she was placed in the airing court, and left there. Witness did not know there was anybody else there at the time; but it appeared that Kennedy was in the closet, in the court. Whilst witness was preparing the breakfast one of the patients' ran into the room, and said that Catherine Clarke was killing someone. Witness immediately ran into the garden, and saw Mary Kennedy lying on the ground bleeding, and Clarke standing over her. She never saw Clarke strike the deceased, but she observed her kick her head with her foot. Witness hallooed out, and she stopped. She then took hold of Clarke and the other attendant, Jane Gilbert, and the patients, came to her assistance. She afterwards saw a flat iron, which one of the patients said she had found in the airing ground. She asked Clarke last evening how she came to do it, and she said that she had taken the flat iron from the cupboard, and that she meant to do all the harm that she could with it. Clarke did not express any sorrow. She knew that she had killed Kenney. There had been no previous quarrel between these women. There was a small flat iron in the cupboard in the

pantry, but witness did not see Clarke take it. She afterwards saw it in the custody of Mrs. Taunton, on the other patients, who replaced it in the cupboard.

Rebecca Turton, one of the inmates of the convict ward, stated that at breakfast time on Saturday morning – between eight and nine o'clock – she looked out into the airing ground, when she saw Catherine Clarke strike the deceased with a flat iron. She hit her as though she was using a dagger. Kenney fell forward, and Clarke kicked her on the head, and hit her with the iron after she had fallen. Witness called out to Mrs. Day, who immediately ran out. Witness caught hold of Clark by the fingers and took the flat iron from her. There was no one in the airing ground but these two women. If the iron had not been taken from Clarke she would have killed them all. Witness had seen the iron before in the pantry, but it was kept locked away. Witness asked Clarke how she came to do it, and she said that people talked to her from the clouds, and that she believed that Kenney was the means of keeping her in confinement. She had repeatedly heard Clarke say that she would kill Kenney. She says she has not done enough yet, and that she has not killed all that she intended.

Mr. Schroder, on being recalled, stated that there were two rooms in the ward, in which there were 24 patients. There were two attendants by day, and four at night. He attributed the death of Mary Kenney to blows upon the head caused by some heavy instrument, producing concussion of the brain.

The Coroner said that at this stage of the proceedings, he thought that it would be better to adjourn the inquest until Wednesday evening. Happily no offence of this kind had before occurred since Dr. Finch had been at the Asylum, and if the jury came to the opinion that Clarke had been the cause of the death of Kenney, he hardly knew whether, as she appeared to be an incurable lunatic, she should commit her for trial, or should allow her to remain at the Asylum. He had therefore written to the Secretary of State for the Home Department, and would doubtless receive a reply on Wednesday. The inquest was then formerly adjourned to Wednesday Evening.

On Wednesday evening the inquiry was resumed, when:-

The Coroner said that since he had last seen the jury, he had heard from the Secretary of State – and although one generally expects to obtain some information from such a quarter, he had not been able to obtain much information on this occasion, and therefore he (the Coroner) and the jury must use their best discretion. If they were satisfied that this woman had committed the act whilst she was insane, she would not be responsible to the law, and it would be their duty to return a verdict to the effect that she had killed the deceased, but that she had not done so of malice aforethought, but whilst she was in an insane state of mind. He thought it would be advisable for the jury to see the woman before they returned their verdict, in order that they might form their own opinion. They had heard the evidence of Dr. Finch and of Mr. Schroder as to her insanity, and they were also to bear in mind that she was placed in the Asylum under the authority of the Secretary of State, as a criminal insane person. He had also thought it right to call the evidence of another medical gentleman, who was unconnected with the establishment, in order to give his testimony as to her state of mind. He then remarked that if – as the Coroner was in the opinion of the public only a secondary officer – they were in error on this occasion, the error could soon be retelled (?), as it was in the power of the magistrates or the Secretary of State to order a further investigation. He then read an extract from a local work by the late Lord Chief Justice of the Common Pleas, to the effect that persons committing a crime when in a state of insanity could not be held to be accountable for their actions, and were thereby exempted from punishment. He then called:-

Mr Cardell, who deposed as follows:- I am a surgeon residing in Salisbury. I have seen Catherine Clarke. She is a criminal lunatic, detained here under a warrant from Sir George Grey as an insane convict. I consider her to be insane at the present time. She is quite incapable of knowing what she is about. She knows her name, but not her age, nor anything connected with her past history. She was quite incoherent when I saw her.

The Jury, after having had an interview with Catherine Clarke, returned a verdict to the effect – that Catherine Clarke did violently kill and slay Elizabeth Kenney, and that she did not do so wilfully or feloniously, of malice aforethought, but that she was of insane mind when she committed that said act.

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