



Penruddocke Court Case

1902



MATERNAL DISLIKE

A strange and painful case was heard this week, when Mrs Penruddocke, the wife of a Justice of the Peace, of Compton Park, Wiltshire, had, at the instance of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, to appear before the magistrates to answer a charge of cruelty to her child, aged 6 years. It was alleged against the lady, not that she had beaten her offspring, but with slow systematic cruelty she had made the little one's life a burden, though she was in all other respects an exemplary mother to her other children. Counsel said she had expressed the wish that the girl would eat some poisonous berries and that she would break her neck and once she suggested placing her to sleep with a child suffering from chickenpox. Among other acts she was said to have given her daughter a raisin with mustard and was charged with supplying it with insufficient food, while its brothers and sisters had plenty – the child ate that set down for the dog – and making it stand in a forked tree on one leg in the rain. The child herself told the court her mother once put a wasp down her back. Witnesses having supported counsel's opening, the accused was committed for trial.

(The Register (Adelaide, South Australia) Saturday 11 October, 1902)

Remarkable allegations were made at Salisbury against Annie Elizabeth Penruddocke, the wife of a magistrate, residing at Compton Park, who was committed on a charge of illtreating her six-year-old daughter. The girl stated that her mother had given her a raisin filled with mustard to eat, had put a wasp down her neck and had rubbed her face with stinging-nettles.

(Clarence and Richmond Examiner (Grafton, NSW, Australia) 18 October, 1902)

A PETITION TO PARLIAMENT

London, November 24, 1902

A monster petition is being organized for presentation to Parliament against the decision of Mr Justice Bigham in the Penruddocke case.

Many of the newspapers protest against what is termed a miscarriage of justice.

[Mrs Annie E. Penruddocke, of Compton Chamberlayne, Wiltshire, was fined £50 yesterday at the Old Bailey for having ill-treated and caused unnecessary suffering to her daughter, Letitia Constance, aged 6 years. The jury severely censured Mr Penruddocke, the husband, who is a magistrate.]

(The Daily News (Perth, Western Australia) Tuesday 25 November, 1902)

CRUELTY TO CHILDREN

The cables informed us a few days ago that the wife of a Wiltshire Magistrate, named Penruddocke, had been fined £50 at the Old Bailey for illtreating and causing unnecessary suffering to a six- year- old child. From English papers we learn that the preliminary hearing of this case occurred at the Salisbury Petty Sessions and resulted in Mrs Penruddocke being committed for trial, bail being allowed. Mrs Penruddocke, formerly Miss Annie Elizabeth Speke, is the daughter of the late Rev. William Speke, of Sheldon Court, Devon and first cousin of the late Captain J. H. Speke, the African explorer. She married in 1890, Mr Charles Penruddocke, a man of great wealth, of Compton Park, Wiltshire and Bratton Street, Maur, Somersetshire, Lord of the Manors of Compton, Chamberlayne, Baverstock and Fyfield, Wiltshire and a magistrate for Wilts and Somerset. The evidence at the first hearing showed that while Mrs Penruddocke was a kind mother to her other children she had a very strong feeling of hatred to this child from its birth and had made it her object to render the child's life unhappy and impossible. A number of servants formerly in the employ of Mrs Penruddocke stated that the child had been repeatedly severely beaten. On one occasion defendant expressed a wish that her daughter would eat poisonous berries; on another that she hoped the child would fall off a donkey and break her neck; on another that she would catch chicken-pox from a brother who was suffering from that complaint and that would finish her off. It was also said that the child had been pushed out of a window and had been fed with mustard. The child Constance was called and gave evidence, causing considerable sensation saying that the big bruise the doctor saw on her body was caused by a kick from her mother. She had a wasp put down her neck by her mother, who immediately afterwards rubbed her face with stinging nettles. Dr Coates, of Salisbury, deposed to examining the child, when he found a large number of bruises all over the body, evidently caused by a tick or whip and one evidently from a kick.

(Hawera & Normanby Star (New Zealand) 20 December, 1902)

ALLEGED CHILD TORTURE

The society lady Mrs Annie Elizabeth Penruddocke, wife of a Justice of the Peace for Wilts and Somerset, this week surrendered to her bail on a charge of torturing her little daughter, aged seven. The accused is an attractive woman of between 35 and 40, who lives in affluence with her husband at Compton Park, Wilts. The main points of the charge, which is laid by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, were stated in the column some weeks ago. Evidence was again given, alleging that the child was fed meagerly while the other children had plenty of the best (once she ate the dog's food from hunger); that she was made to stand on a high bough of a tree for hours at a time; her body was rubbed with stinging nettles; a wasp was put next to her skin inside her clothes; her hair was cut off because the governess said it had been admired; she was placed in the same room as a sufferer from fever while the other children were carefully sent away; pepper was placed in her mouth; she was kept without sufficient bedclothes; her head was tied on one side by the hair to a string passed under her armpit; raisins filled with mustard were given to her; and generally she had a very bad time at her mother's hands, who called her wretch, creature, dwarf and other annoying names. Sir Edward Clarke is defending the accused and it is his intention to show that nothing more than an exercise of parental authority had been used in order to treat a certain nervous complaint from which the child suffered. [The defendant was convicted and much to the public disgust, left the Court after paying a fine of £50. Her husband was severely censured –Ed]

(The Register (Adelaide, South Australia) Saturday 27 December, 1902)

THE END OF A CAUSE CELEBRE

(From our Special Correspondent) London, November 28, 1902

Very seldom indeed has the sentence passed by a judge of the English bench excited so much adverse comment as has been aroused in the cause célèbre known as the "Wiltshire Cruelty Case."

Mrs Penruddocke, a married woman, of good family and ample means, was convicted by the jury of systematically illtreating, neglecting and assaulting her little girl and Mr Justice Bigham inflicted a fine of £50. This monstrous travesty of justice has caused indignation throughout the country and particularly among the section of the community where the inbred notion is that there is "one law for the rich and another for the poor." The case was tried in London instead of Wiltshire Assizes in order to give the defendant the benefit of a jury unbiased by local gossip and when, after a long and exhaustive hearing, the jury's verdict was adverse to her, it certainly appears closely akin to a mockery of justice to let her off with a fine that would be equivalent to mulcting the wife of a laborer in "five shillings and costs." The queer point about the case is that save to her daughter Connie, Mrs Penruddocke appears to have been a kindly if not indulgent mother, but her treatment of that little girl can only be described as hideously cruel. The only reason for the strange animus she displayed toward the girl that the evidence disclosed was that a physical weakness induced objectionable habits in the little thing. To overcome the child's infirmity which would probably have required a long term of careful medical treatment to eradicate, Mrs Penruddocke resorted to systematic brutality which was more likely to send the hapless little creature to an early grave than to effect a cure. Connie was compelled for hours together, and in all sorts of weather, lightly clad, to stand in the fork of a tree; to run up and down from the hall to the lodge gates – a distance of half a mile – for hours on end; the mother answered the little girl's request for a piece of cake with a raisin filled with mustard; made her sleep in an attic without a sufficiency of

©Wiltshire OPC Project/ Cathy Sedgwick/2012

clothing; "dietet" her to such an extent that Connie had recourse to the dish of oddments set aside for the dog; blistered her with nettles; put a wasp (happily dead) down the child's neck and struck her with a bunch of keys. Whippings were frequently Connie's portion and the "love" Mrs Penruddocke bore for the poor little creature found verbal expression in such epithets as "beast", "wretch", and "ruffian", with pious wishes that the child might catch chicken pox and be "finished off", might fall down and break her neck, or partake of poisonous berries. The net result of Mrs Penruddocke's vicious treatment was that the girl became thin to emaciation, was a mass of bruises and weals and weighed when nearly seven years old only 60 lb.

The jury very properly severely censured the father for countenancing the gross illtreatment of the child, who but for the intervention of two servants, who communicated with the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, would probably have succumbed to Mrs Penruddocke's peculiar maternal methods. The child, as she appeared in court, did not seem to be much the worse for her treatment, but, of course, she has not been under her mother's care for some time. The fact that Connie's health had not been entirely ruined by her mother, weighed heavily with the Judge, who also took into account the fact that the Penruddockes had been put to a very heavy expense in connection with the trial and that the woman herself was not in the best of health. But making due allowance for these things and for the social ostracism which will probably be the lot of the Penruddockes, a mere fine of £50 seems an absurdly inadequate punishment for Mrs Penruddocke's wickedness.

To the suspicious all things are objects of suspicion and the very unusual courtesy extended to the defendant at the Old Bailey during her trial is doubtless responsible in some measure for the loudly-voiced opinion that social influence mitigated Mrs Penruddocke's punishment. Not only was she supplied with a leather arm-chair, with a maroon-colored cushion, from the aldermen's room, but by the courtesy of Mr Under-Sheriff Doulton she was invited to luncheon each day in his room and retired there, it was understood, for tea after her conviction. A cushioned arm-chair for the accommodation of a prisoner had never been seen in the dock at the Old Bailey before and few, if any, accused persons have had the privilege of leaving the dock under each day for luncheon in the Under-Sheriff's room.

The Penruddockes of Compton Chamberlayne are an old stock, which derives, on the maternal side, from an ancestor of the Lowthers, now Earls of Lonsdale. The family branched by-and-bye into Penruddocke of Hale, in Hants, and Penruddocke of Compton Chamberlayne, in Wilts. The Hants branch became extinct, but the Wilts branch has been more enduring. Mr Charles Penruddocke, born in 1828, married a daughter of the late Mr Walter Long, M.P., and became the father of Mr Charles Penruddocke, of Compton Park, Wilts and Bretton St. Maur, Somerset, J.P., for both counties. He married the daughter of the Rev. William Speke, of Sheldon Court, Devon, and is the head of a rather numerous family, including "Connie."

(The Advertiser (Adelaide, South Australia) Thursday 1 January, 1903)

**** Footnote:**

Laetitia Constance Penruddocke, subject of the Old Bailey Court Case of 1902 was ordered by Mr Justice Bigham to be handed over to her father's cousin- Dr Penruddocke and his wife.