



Crime and Punishment

Westbury

1849

Execution of Rebecca Smith

The last woman to be hanged in England for the murder of her own infant, Rebecca Smith in 1849, only went to the gallows because of the truly exceptional circumstances of her crime:

“My little baby is wasting away,” Rebecca Smith, 44, told her friends in Westbury, Wiltshire. That seemed strange to them, because the baby appeared quite normal and healthy. At the same time she was asking people to help her buy arsenic at the town’s chemist shop. When the baby, one-month-old Richard, died, the police were called in.

Richard’s body was found to be riddled with arsenic, and when Rebecca appeared at Devizes Assizes in August 1849, she offered no defence to the charge of infanticide.

The jury found her guilty and recommended mercy because she was destitute and in poor health. She was sentenced to be hanged, and in the death cell she told an incredible story.

She had been married for 28 years, she said, and had given birth to 11 children. All but the first one were dead. The second child died of natural causes, and she killed the next seven. The tenth child died of natural causes, and then came Richard. From the first night of her marriage, she added, her husband, a habitual drunkard, had physically and sexually abused her.

The execution of Rebecca Smith took place on Saturday forenoon, in front of the Prison, Devizes. It is impossible to give anything like a correct calculation of the number of persons present to witness the awful scene, they were countless. From nine until eleven o’clock people poured into the towns in shoals – on foot, in wagons, boats, and by the latter hour, the prison yard, the banks of the canal, every tree, hedge, and field that could command a view of the drop, appeared crammed. Still the roads were lined with persons thronging to the spot. People were there from every part of the country-old and young, and infants, but they were chiefly of the labouring classes, and there were thousands more of women than men.

After the conviction, the bodies of her other nine deceased children were exhumed and traces of arsenic were detected in several of their bodies. Smith later confessed “that she had

poisoned her babies, fearing that they might 'come to want'" Evidently, Smith felt that killing her children was kinder than letting them die slowly of starvation- a common fate of many poverty-stricken children during the decade known as the Hungry Forties.

From the period of miserable woman entered the prison to the moment of her execution, her behaviour was most becoming. Mild and contented in her manner and deportment might be thought that she was totally incapable of the unnatural crime of which she was convicted. Free from guile or hypocrisy, she at once unhesitatingly confessed her crime, and acknowledged the justice of the punishment that awaited her, and frequently expressed a hope that others would take warning by her fate. At the same time she was extremely ignorant, and betrayed a want of any deep feeling. She could read but imperfectly, and what she did read she was scarcely able to understand. The pious and excellent chaplain-had been unceasing in his endeavours to awake in her the true spirit of penitence and-prayer, but, as may be supposed, he had a difficult and a laborious task. Suspended between hope and fear, she would at times rely on the unbounded mercy of her Saviour, and at times exclaim, that her sins were too great to be forgiven. For several days prior to her execution, her mind appeared to be so entirely occupied with the thoughts of her fate in the world to come, as to destroy all feeling regarding the miserable end that attended her in the present world. The manner in which she was to quit this life did not appear to trouble her. It was the dread of the hereafter – and if it be possible to judge of the human heart from outward observances, it may be said that she was at length brought to a proper sense of the awful situation and was truly penitent.

On Tuesday last, her husband and daughter, accompanied by her brother and sister, and some other members of her family, were admitted, for the last time, to see her. Strange to say, there was a total absence of feeling on the part of the husband, as to induce some remarks to be made on his conduct, but without any good impression. The sister, on the other hand, was deeply affected, as was her brother, both of them wept bitterly. As the time approached for her execution, she appeared to feel more deeply her dreadful situation, and she passed rather a restless night. But she afterwards recovered her wonted calmness; and ate a moderate breakfast in the morning.

Shortly before twelve, the solemn tolling of the prison bell announced that she had but a few more minutes to live, and she was ushered from her cell. Accompanied by the proper authorities she was at once conducted to the gallows, the rev.chaplain impressively reading portions of the burial service as the procession proceeded. During this time she did not utter a word, nor did a sigh escape her, but her countenance appeared quite composed, and her step firm. Arrived on the drop, the rope was in a moment round her neck; she clasped and raised her hands together as if in fervent prayer, and after a slight struggle she was launched into eternity.

She was about forty four years of age – had been married twenty eight years, and had eleven children-the eldest only, a daughter, is now alive. The second a boy died of a bowel complaint at the age of fourteen weeks. All the rest, with the exception of the last but one, the unhappy woman acknowledged she poisoned a day or two after their birth. She was extremely ill herself when this child was born, and it was in consequence taken to a neighbour, it died a fortnight afterwards, but she never even saw it after it was taken from her. Seven of her children she destroyed by administering to the a poison she called "blue", used for destroying rats and mice, and which she said she took from the ricks, where it had been

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placed for that purpose. The last child she poisoned with arsenic, and in each case she put the poison in the child's mouth with her finger. She implicated no other person in the crime; her and her alone did it, and no one else know anything about it. She toiled hard in the field during the day, and at night she came home and washed, and did the entire household work.

“Execution of Rebecca Smith for Murdering her Infant - Lloyds Weekly Newspaper (London England) September 2nd 1849

