



Particulars of the Life, Trial, Character, and Behaviour of
MARGARET DICKSON,
 AGED 22,
 Who was executed at Edinburgh, on Monday, Feb. 1, 1813,
 For the *MURDER* of her Bastard Child.

MMARGARET DICKSON was born at Mugsleburgh, about five miles from Edinburgh, and brought up by parents in a strict attendance on the worship of God, and taught early the duties of that station, in which was most probable Providence would place her, namely, a laborious one.

It is necessary to observe, that the people in the town, where she lived, are either fishermen, gardeners, or those who are employed in making salt; and as Edinburgh is supplied with those articles from that place, most of the mens wives are employed to get their living, by carrying the different articles thither, which they cry about the streets.

When Margaret Dickson grew up, she was married to a fisherman, but there being a demand for seamen he was impressed on board one of the ships of war.

During the time he was abroad, she became acquainted with a man in the same neighbourhood, who seduced her, and the consequence was, that she became with child, in Scotland every woman who was guilty of fornication, was obliged to sit on a seat in the most conspicuous place in the church, three different Sundays, when she received a public rebuke from the minister, and so much were the women intimidated at the disgrace, that many of them destroyed the fruits of their amours, rather than be made a spectacle to all the inhabitants of a parish; for nothing was more common than for these, who would not come to church to hear a sermon in seven years, would go to hear the shame of one of her own sex.

Margaret Dickson was accused by some of her neighbours with being pregnant, but the fear of shame induced her to deny it, although the symptoms were very plain.

As the time of her delivery drew near, she endeavoured to conceal it the more, and at last the child was born, but whether alive or not, cannot be certainly known; only that she was apprehended on suspicion, and committed to Edinburgh Gaol. The surgeon, who examined the body of the child, made the usual experiments, by putting the lungs into water, but according to the opinion of some eminent physicians, that experiment is not always to be depended upon, it is impossible for men to know every thing; and it often happens, that gentlemen, who have made the law their study, and obtained seats on the bench, are obliged, in taking evidence, to abide by the opinion of a surgeon. Indeed, where cases are plain, such as a wound with a weapon, that must of course prove mortal, no doubt can remain; but then, when the life of a person depends upon the opinion of two or three surgeons concerning a disputed point, we think that both the court and the jury ought to lean to mercy. In the course of the evidence produced against Margaret Dickson, it appeared from the depositions of several witnesses, that she had been apparently pregnant, although she continued to deny it. It also appeared, that a child was found dead near the place where she lived, and there were to be seen about her all the appearances of a delivery.

The surgeon deposed, that when the lungs of the child were put into water they swimmied, so that it was their opinion that it had breathed; for as they said, unless a child has breathed, so as air could be drawn into the lungs those parts of the body will not swim. Upon the whole the evidence was believed by the jury, who found her guilty, and she received sentence of death.

While she lay in confinement she was extremely penitent, and acknowledged that she had in many instances, neglected her duty, and likewise that she had been guilty of fornication; but to the last denied murdering the child, or that she had the least intention of so doing. Her reason for concealing the birth of the child was for fear of being made a public example in the church, and a laughing-stock to all her neighbours. She said she was suddenly taken in labour, sooner than she expected, and her agonies not only prevented her from getting assistance, but also left her in a state of insensibility, so that what became of her child she could not say.

When she was brought to the gallows she behaved in the most penitent manner, but still denied her guilt, after which she was turned off, and hung the usual time.

When cut down her body was given to her friends, who put her into a coffin, in order to carry it to Musselburgh, for interment; but the men who had charge of the corpse stopped at a village, called Pepper Mill, about two miles from Edinburgh, in order to get some refreshment, leaving the cart with the body near the door. While they were drinking one of the men thought he saw the lid of the coffin move, and going towards the cart, uncovered it, when he could perceive the woman to move, and she arose upright in her coffin; upon which he and others took to their heels, almost killed with fear. A gardener who was drinking in the house went up to the coffin, and had the presence of mind to open a vein, and within an hour afterwards she was so well recovered as to be able to go to bed. Next morning she walked home to Musselburgh. It is necessary to observe that much of the Scottish law is built on Roman Pandects, and according to them every person upon whom the judgment of the court has been executed, has no more to suffer, but must be for ever discharged. Another maxim in the same institution is, that the executed person is dead law, so that the marriage is dissolved. This was the case with M. Dickson, for the King's advocate could not pursue her any further, but filed a bill in the High Court of Justiciary against the Sheriff, for not seeing the judgment executed, and her husband being a good-natured man, was married to her a few days after. She still continued to deny that she had committed the crime. From her example, and the uncertainty of her guilt, it is to be hoped that juries will be cautious how they find a verdict where the case may appear doubtful.

This remarkable affair happened at Edinbrough.