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## A HORRIBLE MYSTERY.

### THE PLACER TRAGEDY—MURDER OF "VINA" COATES.

(From the Daily Record of March 31st.)

It has remained for California to add to the chapter of horrors with which this fair spring has been ushered in, the most appalling tragedy of all, to give to the public eye the fringe and edge of a mystery which seems too close knit to be unraveled, too deeply buried to be dragged from its bloody hiding place. Holy writ declares "There is nothing covered that shall not be revealed; and hid that shall not be known." Yet here is the recital of a blood-curdling horror so enwrapped in gloom that, at this hour's search, skill, theory and discovery have but deepened the blackness of the murderous silence.

During several weeks past, dispatches from various points in Placer county have mentioned the disappearance of a Miss Coates, the search for her by her father, and his singular death. On Friday the body of the unfortunate girl was found, and in a few hours a representative of the *Record* was on the ground gathering facts, and to-day we lay before our readers every material obtainable detail of "the most arch deed of

#### PITEOUS MASSACRE

That ever yet this land was guilty of."

The Coates family consisted of C. M. Coates, the father, aged about 50 years; his wife, now deceased; George, a son, aged about 12; Mary, a daughter, aged 21; Elvina, a daughter, aged 10½ years; and an infant son of four or five. Coates came from the southwest to California, nearly ten years ago, and settled at Virginia Town, in Placer county.

About four years ago he moved up to Badger Ravine, about one and a half miles southeast from Gold Hill, and about two and a half miles west of Pearyn Station, upon the Central Pacific Railroad.

About five years ago Mrs. Coates died. About two years ago Coates received news of the death of a relative, by which there fell to him a small property. He went East and secured about half of it; the remainder, cashed, he received on the day he met his death, as described below.

Coates gained his livelihood by tending stock and working in pot-hole claims, making but little money thereby. He however managed to buy, latterly, a very neat cottage, where his elder daughter kept house for him. Here he dwelt, surrounded by his children, and, so far as the world knew, the past few years at least in

#### COMPARATIVE HAPPINESS.

Coates was a feeble man, and at times subject to fits, in which he would fall prone upon the earth. He knew he was not long for this world, and often spoke of his fragile health. We would gladly let the curtain of the past remain undrawn; willingly we will not speak ill of the dead, but that full light may be thrown upon the dark tragedy here unfolded, and every possible avenue for truth be searched, it is necessary to go back a few years, when we find it admitted that while Coates loved his children, he was a harsh man. Pity did not often fill his breast to outbreaking, and while not absolutely cruel, he was deemed somewhat callous to the appeals of mercy. In 1864 Coates was brought before Justice Moore, of Newcastle, for cruelty to an orphan child he and his wife had taken to board. Through testimony which the Justice tells us he was compelled to receive, but totally disbelieved, Coates procured his acquittal. The child was a mere infant, and this couple

had chained it in an outhouse, left it to wallow in its own filth, and it **FINALLY DIED.**

As is alleged, from sheer inattention. An uncle of this little one subsequently meeting Coates knocked him down, and crying, "You murdered my little niece," jumped upon him and kicked and stamped upon him and Coates was charged with incest, and one or two of his own children, then very young, were witnesses against him, but admitted on cross-examination that the charges were false, and that they had been bought up to testify by parties who desired to ruin Coates and run him off his little plat of land. No one believed Coates guilty, and the universal verdict is that in his family he was a correct father and kind parent, though strict, and that he loved and respected his children. Their behavior, testimony and breeding gave evidence of this also. All these details must be remembered in connection with what follows.

#### THE MYSTERY BEGINS.

On the 8th day of March, 1873, the family was thus situated. James Coates was living with and herding sheep for Robert Majors, about half a mile from his father's house, a ridge of hills intervening, on top of which the flock was tended. Majors is a single man, and has a cabin where he and the boy lodged at the foot of a steep range of hills, in a small ravine. The son George worked at Mr. Gregory's, some four miles away. Mary, Elvina and the infant boy were at home. At 1 o'clock Coates started for Newcastle, on the Central Pacific Railroad and four miles distant, to receive \$670, the remainder of the bequest spoken of. From Coates' house a trail leads up the hills, along the ridge eastward to Newcastle. This was the road the father took. Another trail leads to the southward up the same ridge, to the spot where James was tending sheep and on to Majors' house. Fifteen minutes after Elvina took this path to visit her brother. Every day or two she made this trip of half a mile, always taking with her the little boy of five years. But her father

#### HAD FORBIDDEN HER

To go up there, not deeming it best for her to go alone. On this occasion Elvina did not take the child with her. It cried to go. She bribed it to remain by giving it a book, a slate and a pencil. The elder sister remarked this. She was seen to go up the hill side, joyously skipping along,

"A simple child,  
That lightly drew its breath,  
And felt its life in every limb."

Elvina, familiarly called "Vina," was, as before stated, not 11 years old. She was about four feet high, remarkably well developed, a pretty girl and exceedingly well formed. She was a pure blonde, though the free air had blown the tan of health upon her cheek, and her auburn hair had browned beneath the fervent sun. Her eyes were blue, large, expressive. Bare-headed, barefooted, but always cleanly, though oft in tattered frocks.

"She had a rattle, woodland air"

A simple, free-hearted, good-tempered, well-behaved child.

#### THE PLOT THICKENS.

A woodchopper saw Coates three miles upon his road, just where the time—2 P. M.—should place him. He arrived less than one hour later at Newcastle, received his money and started home where he arrived about 4.30 P. M. Finding the girl absent he became angered and regretful at her disobedience, cut him a switch to punish her, and went up the trail she had taken. We next hear of him on the ridge over-

looking Majors' house, about 5.30 P. M. Without coming down he called to the inmates. Majors and James came out.

"Is your sister there?"

"She is not," was the answer of his son.

"Have you seen her?"

"I have not seen her to-day."

We can imagine the fear which was then awakened in her father's heart.

"She is lost," he cried.

"Come down and have supper," said Mr. Majors, "then I'll help you search."

"No," responded Coates, "She may be at home by this time." And he left for his house.

It was between 6 and 7 when he came home. He sat down to the meal Mary had prepared, but he barely tasted one dish, arose abruptly and said, "I must find Vina." Then the father and daughter went out upon

#### THE SEARCH.

They took different routes and called aloud from all the surrounding hills "Vina," "Vina," "Oh Vina," but echo alone gave answer, as the name died in vocal waves upon the darkening hill sides. The young moon sank in deep night, but no response.

At 10 o'clock, the daughter Mary no longer hearing her father's voice, and concluding he had found Elvina, groped her way to the house to find no one there but her baby brother. The night wore away, and the next morning Charles Vincent, a neighbor, going up the trail from Coates' house toward Majors, found Coates, about 300 yards from his house, lying stark and dead. Upon his lips "the speller had set the seal of silence." He lay upon his face, his right hand beneath his forehead, his left outstretched upon the ground. A few inches from his head was a stone as large as a man's fist, but it is a country where such stones abound, and no bruise or mark on the body shows that Coates fell upon it in any way. No sign of violence was found upon the body; a slight scratch upon the neck, just below and back of the left ear, was visible, but amounted to nothing. The \$670 was on his person. Justice Clough held an inquest, and a verdict of death by heart disease was rendered, but

#### NO POST MORTEM

Examination was had, and here we mark the first error on the part of the officers. Monday, the 10th, the old man was buried at Gold Hill. A young Italian, who sat up and watched with the corpse on Sunday night, took cold by reason, became ill, and in a few days he was dead. Now all the country was up in search of the missing girl, and for eighteen days it continued. Regular bands of men formed with leaders and scoured every ravine, every bush and canyon. The chief of these searchers were as follows, for as they numbered hundreds we can name but a few. From Auburn there was Sheriff Dunham and a company, mounted and on foot, and Under Sheriff Huntley and a company; Constable Walker and a company from Rocklin; Constable Hearts and a company from Ophir; Constable Hotchkiss and a band from Lincoln. Besides these, scores of private citizens were out upon the search. Among these were citizens of Newcastle, District Attorney Fulwester of Auburn, W. B. Lyons of the *Placer Argosy*, D. Perkins of Rocklin, and many others. All the officers and citizens were unremitting, and though the numbers dwindled as time wore on and no trace was found, still was

#### THE SEARCH KEPT UP.

At this time suspicion attached to many parties, and mutterings of a storm were heard, portending surely the worst form of mob law. Now

transpired an event, which added new depths to the mystery, and cleared suspicion from the then suspected parties.

On last Friday, March 28th, just twenty-one days of Elvina's disappearance being gone, Jesse Parker of Rocklin started out to find some stray horses. At 4 o'clock in the afternoon he found himself on a blind trail about midway between Gold Hill and Coates' Ranch. As he rode along he saw a bundle lying in a prospect hole, which seemed filled with water; the limb of a tree protruded from the water. Riding by about 100 yards

#### SOMETHING INSPIRED HIM

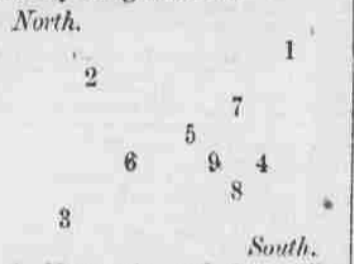
To turn back. Parker said to himself, "This is foolish, it's bad luck to turn back;" but as he rode away the story of the missing girl occurred to him, and he forthwith turned about and cantered to the prospect hole. Dismounting, he saw floating across the mouth of the hole, just spanning it, a bundle of clothing and at one end a burlap sack, filled. He laid hold of the sack and grasped a human head; the action moved the body, and a girl's foot washed out from the bundle. Parker mounted in hot haste and rode to the nearest settlement. A picked body of men at once went up to the spot and watched all night beside the body, not touching it or moving it. Meanwhile the news spread like wildfire over the entire country, and morning found the Acting Coroner, Justice Clough, of Newcastle, and a hundred citizens on the spot. Among these we note all the officers and gentlemen before named, and Dr. Dubois, of Auburn, Dr. Flint, of Lincoln, Daniel Hogan, of Newcastle, George Aldrich, of Virginia, and many other prominent citizens.

#### THE BODY REMOVED.

Under direction of the officials, the body was removed from the hole and an inquest held. The prospect hole was in a secluded spot, surrounded and shaded by foliage. It was twelve feet wide. It was filled within a foot of the top with water, and the limb before referred to rested on the bottom of the upper rim of the pit.

#### PLAT OF THE GROUNDS.

As well as it can be done now, we give a rough plat of the positions, to enable the reader the better to comprehend the situation, relative positions and not geographical accuracy being aimed at:



1. Newcastle, and four miles from 2.
2. Gold Hill, which is two miles from 3.
3. Virginia town.
4. Majors'.
5. Coates'.
6. Where the girl was found, nearly equi-distant between Gold Hill and her father's house, and about a mile from each.
7. Direction of the trail from Coates' to Newcastle.
8. Direction of the trail the girl usually took.
- 7 and 8. The direction of the ridge between Coates' and Majors'.
9. Where Coates was found.

From this it will be seen the girl was found in an opposite direction from that she usually took, and about one mile from home. Between Gold Hill and Coates' lived the young Italian who died, and scattered along are the cabins of a few Mexicans, but all quite distant from the place where the girl was found. Returning to the inquest. The body was removed from the

hole and found to have been lying on its face. A wheat sack, which would hold 120 pounds of wheat, being about 30 inches long, was drawn over the head and bound tightly about the waist with a cord. The sack fitted closely to the body and shoulders. It was marked "H. H. S.," the initials of a merchant at Newcastle, Mr. H. H. Smith, whose clerks swore they sold many such sacks but never sold any to Coates. The latest sale was to a reputable family named Gregory, but many people had like sacks, and this circumstance, at present, has developed nothing.

Removing the sack from the body, little Elvina lay upon the sward before the silent spectators. From being long in the water the flesh of the feet was beginning to peel off in wrinkles. The eyes and forehead were swollen and discolored, but not from bruises—simply natural causes. The mouth slightly open, the blue eyes partly closed, the little face quite natural. Cheek and lip death had touched with his icy finger, and chilled the young blood in her veins to stillness.

"With ruthless haste he bound  
The silken fringes of those  
Curtailed lids forever."

And she was as mute and dumb as the green turf she lay upon, or the wil' flowers which rocked in the breeze and nodded against the cold cheek of the murdered child, and kissed her parted lips as if welcoming her to their earthly home.

#### THE EXAMINATION.

Drs. DuBois and Flint in due time, the body being removed to Gold Hill, made an examination, and testified that there was not the slightest trace of violence or struggle. The girl had not been violated. Her clothing was in good order. True, her dress was torn, but it was in that condition when she left home. She wore knit, close-fitting under clothing from her knees to her waist, buttoned closely, which was undisturbed.

On Sunday, the 23d, some children had been at this identical prospect hole, and had moved the pole or limb spoken of. Was the murdered girl then at the bottom of the pit, held there beneath the angle of that limb? Was she drowned? No post mortem was held to determine the condition of the lungs. Error the second. Was she suffocated? The same error has prevented that being known, for, on Saturday afternoon, a rough box was hastily constructed, the coffin ordered from Condoie not arriving in time, and the rapidly swelling body was buried, and so Elvina Coates, and the secret of her murder too, we fear, were put six feet beneath the sod beside her dead father, at Gold Hill. The verdict of the Coroner's jury points toward no one as guilty. Will it ever be known?

#### THEORIES.

A score of theories are afloat in Placer county as to the truth of this case. These are a few:

1. Her father killed her.
2. She was kidnapped by being seized and sacked as described, and was suffocated in the bagging.
3. She was kidnapped and attempts to outrage her failing, she was suffocated and thrown into the prospect hole.
4. She was beguiled by some human serpent, and bribed by presents to come away from home alone, as she did, and to leave her usual route and go westward toward Gold Hill; then she was followed, the kidnaping resulted.
5. She was killed by those who desired to revenge themselves upon Coates.
6. She was drowned in the sack.
7. She was dead when placed in the sack, for no evidences of a struggle were found.

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