

Edward Mark Groves

Isle of Wight County Press – 9 August 1919

EXTRAORDINARY SUICIDE AT THE COUNTY ASYLUM.

ORDINARY v. SAFETY RAZORS.

On Wednesday the Deputy Coroner (F. A. Joyce, Esq.) held an inquest at the County Asylum on the body of Edward Mark Groves, 44, labourer, of John-street, Newport, an inmate of that institution, who committed suicide on Monday under remarkable circumstances by cutting his throat whilst being shaved. Ald. J. Dore, J.P., and several members of the Asylum Committee were present. Deceased had been serving in the Devonshire Regiment on the French and Italian fronts, and was badly wounded in the head by shell fire during the fighting last year. His two brothers, Mr. H. W. Groves (Down-end) and Mr. E. J. Groves (Shide) attended.

Mr. J. H. Green, clerk of the Asylum, said deceased was admitted on April 11, 1919. He was a single man.

Mr. T. D. Leadbeater, chief attendant, said that at about 10.45 a.m. on Monday another attendant told him that a man had cut his throat in the kitchen of Ward 2. He sent for the doctor and hurried to the ward, where he saw deceased lying on his back on the floor and attendant Oliver Gale holding a sponge over his throat. Deceased had a very serious wound in the throat, and as his breathing was very laboured he turned him a little more on his side. Gale said deceased cut his throat with a razor. Both Dr. Erskine and Dr. Reardon arrived very quickly. Seeing that the safety razor on the table had no blood on it he asked Gale what razor he had been using, and he said "An ordinary razor." Witness expressed surprise and asked why. Gale said "The safety razor is blunt and I could not shave the man with it." Safety razors had been used there since Dr. Peachell introduced them. – Q. Were ordinary razors used ? – No razor was used, except by very special permission of the medical superintendent up to that time. – Q. There is no positive order given to the barbers not to use ordinary razors ? – Not in actual words, but only a safety razor is provided. – Q. Then really the order is one you arrive at rather by inference than direct instructions ? – Exactly. There is no written order. When he handed the safety razors to the charge attendants he told them they were for shaving the patients. Gale was second in charge of the ward. The charge attendant over Gale was Frederick George Peach. Gale would receive his orders from him with regard to ward work. He was appointed attendant five years ago, but he had been away to the war and returned a few months ago. He would have to shave about 14 patients in that ward, and was rather good at the work. – Q. If an ordinary razor was used in this case, it must be one that the attendant had himself ? – In all probability ; at any rate, it would not belong to the Asylum.

Mr. H. W. Groves : I think it is great negligence on somebody's part.

Oliver Gale, M.M., said deceased was the last patient he had to shave that morning. He did not use the safety razor. He had used the safety razor on one of the other patients, but could not shave deceased with it, as it was too blunt. He had shaved several other patients with his own razor before he shaved deceased with it. Deceased and he were alone at the time. – Q. Have you ever received an order not to use a safety razor ? [*that doesn't make sense here, possibly 'order only to use a safety razor'*] – No, sir. There was more than one safety razor in stock, but in that ward there was simply one razor and the same blade in all the time. There was nothing to prevent him from applying for another. He had done most of the shaving in the ward since he returned. – Q. Did you understand that an ordinary razor was not to be used ? – Well, of course I had an idea myself that it should not be used. He was standing

behind deceased, and as he was shaving his throat upwards towards his chin deceased suddenly put up both fists, one on witness's right hand and the other on the end of the razor, and pressed the edge of the razor with great force into his throat, at the same time apparently bringing his head forward with a sharp jerk on the razor. Deceased did not actually grip the razor or fight for the possession of it. Witness was not wounded at all, but regained possession of the razor, got deceased out of the chair on to the floor, and called for the charge attendant. – Q. How had deceased been deporting himself before ? – Very well ; quite lively. He was working the same morning up till 10 o'clock. – Q. He made no sign as if he wished to get at the razor before ? – No. He sat down in a chair just as quietly as any of the other patients. – Q. Have you shaved him many times before ? – About once a fortnight since April, most times with the ordinary razor. – Q. I suppose, as a matter of fact, the ordinary razor does the work faster than the safety ? – Yes, sir.

The Coroner said he was not certain in his own mind whether he should not have had a jury to determine the degree responsibility, if any, attaching to the witness in the matter. He had, however, come to the conclusion on the facts that this sudden act of deceased happened in such an unexpected and unparalleled way that no criminal neglect could be proved against the witness ; he did not think any one could have expected such a thing. If the witness had left a razor in the ward, where deceased could have got at it, it would have been another matter. If, however, the Asylum authorities or police considered that a jury should be called to determine the point, he would adjourn the inquiry for that purpose.

Ald. Dore : There is no need, I think.

Insp. Sibbeck said the police had no objection to the inquiry proceeding without a jury.

Dr. Erskine (medical superintendent) said he was called about 10.45 and went at once to Ward 2, where deceased was lying on the floor. There was a great deal of blood. He first tried to stop the haemorrhage. Deceased had got some of the blood into the windpipe and lungs, and they tried artificial respiration to get it out, but they had not gone on very long before they found that his pulse had stopped. In conjunction with Dr. Reardon, he made a post-mortem examination. There was an incised wound 4 ½ in. across the front of the throat, almost central, extending to a depth of 2in. It was a wonderfully even wound, not such as would have been caused by drawing a razor across from one side to the other. It was quite compatible with the evidence of Gale. It was a terrible wound, and tremendous force must have been used by deceased. He, as medical superintendent, presumed that the barber would only use a safety razor in shaving patients. – Q. Although no actual order has been issued that an ordinary razor should not be used ? – Apparently that is so. – Q. Because it is not deemed necessary to issue such an order ? – No. – Q. It is one which any one would infer ? – Yes. I would like to say that I presumed that no other razor but a safety was ever used. – Q. You had no evidence to the contrary ? – No. – Asked what was the practice before the introduction of the safety razor, witness said patients used to be shaved with the ordinary razor in some cases, whilst they used to clip them in others. – Q. As in convict establishments ? – Yes. – Q. Had the deceased shown any suicidal tendency ? – Not the slightest; quite the other way. He had delusions that he was God Almighty and Jesus Christ, and that he had come to save the world. His medical record stated that he was not of a suicidal tendency, and he was not marked as suicidal. It was a surprise to know that he had committed suicide.

Dr. A. F. Reardon (deputy medical superintendent) gave confirmatory evidence.

The Coroner said he must record the verdict that deceased committed suicide by cutting his throat whilst of unsound mind. He accepted Gale's statement of what occurred as correct. It was a quite

unexpected occurrence; he had never heard of such a case before. The question of whether an ordinary razor should have been used was a grave one, which should be considered by the medical staff and the committee. He supposed that before safety razors were introduced ordinary razors were used. Unless Gale had received a definite order not to use an ordinary razor, one with experience of safety razors would understand his preferring to use an ordinary razor. Had Gale left the razor lying about where patients could have got it, it would have been gross negligence.

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