Joseph Kearon

Isle of Wight County Press – 30 May 1925

PARKHURST CONVICT'S STRANGE DEATH.

SEQUEL TO SELF-CHOSEN "IRON RATIONS."

On Wednesday the Deputy-Coroner (F. A. Joyce, Esq.) held an inquest at Parkhurst on a convict named Joseph Kearon, aged 43, who died under extraordinary, if not unique, circumstances in local prison experience. For some strange reason he adopted the habit of swallowing various kinds of foreign substances, which brought on acute gastritis in so serious a form that it undermined his constitution and caused death.

Chief-Officer J. R. Simpson said deceased was sentenced to seven years' penal servitude at Manchester on July 8, 1924, for wounding with intent to murder. He was received at Parkhurst on August 21st, and had since been continuously in hospital. He was a labourer by occupation.

Principal Hospital-Officer H. R. Dove said deceased died at 3.40 a.m. on Monday. He was reported seriously ill on the 6th ult., and his relatives were notified, but no one came to see him.

Dr. Stanley Craig, medical officer at the Prison, said deceased was suffering from acute gastritis when he came to Parkhurst. He had been in the habit for some years of swallowing various foreign bodies, and his prison record showed that operations had been performed upon him elsewhere for the removal of those substances.—Q. Has he been classified as weak-minded?—No.—Q. Why was that course not pursued in regard to a man who adopted such an extraordinary habit?—Witness said probably at the beginning deceased did it to enlist sympathy. He had been previously convicted.

The Coroner said when a man indulged in such a morbid habit it would seem to demonstrate that he was suffering from weakness of intellect, and he could not quite understand why he should not have been classified as weak-minded.

Dr. Craig said deceased was being watched night and day.

The Coroner asked what form of foreign bodies deceased was in the habit of swallowing.

Dr. Craig: Knives, forks, and spoons, parts of machinery and parts of scissors.—Q. Buttons?—Yes, he would take buttons.—Q. Although not classified as a mental deficient he was under special observation?—Yes, to prevent him swallowing any further foreign bodies and also with a view to certification.—Q. How many operations do his medical records show to have been performed upon him?—As far as I can say two, or possibly three.—Q. Had he been performed on here?—No. In November last he swallowed the handles of two spoons, after breaking the bowls off. He was X-rayed, and a shadow was shown on the plate which indicated the possible presence of a foreign body, but we only had the prisoner's word for it in this case. It was decided to have an operation a very few days afterwards, but before that he passed it both in a normal way, and therefore an operation was not performed. Nothing more was discovered after further X-ray examination, and, as far as I know, he has not swallowed anything in that way since. That habit accounted for his suffering from gastric trouble. Early in January he was moved to a ward, and he had an attack of pneumonia, and from that time

onwards he suffered from acute abdominal pains and vomiting. The swallowing of those substances naturally injured his constitution, as it had been going on for some years. Since the acute vomiting he had been unable to take any form of food. He was given all kinds of specially suitable foods, with brandy, port, whisky, chicken, &c., but he gradually became weaker, though he lingered for a considerable time.

The Coroner: Do you want to make a post-mortem examination? Possibly quite an interesting museum still remains in his body. If you wish to do so you can have full permission to make it.

Dr. Craig: Thank you. He added that deceased's stomach ultimately became so weak that it prevented him from eating. An operation would have been very critical, owing to his extremely weak condition.

The Coroner: How long did this abnormal habit go back?

Principal Hospital-Officer Dove: About three years before he came here.

Dr. Craig said it was a very old trick among some prisoners. They had two men there who commenced to swallow needles, but they saw the error of their way and stopped in time. Possibly it was done in the first instance for malingering. It was an uncomfortable method of doing it, but deceased had continued to a certain extent. There was "method in their madness" in doing that as prisoners broke off the pointed parts of knives, forks, &c., which would do most injury, and swallowed the handle part.

The Coroner said that deceased seemed to have indulged an abnormal appetite, which one could scarcely recognize from a health point of view, by swallowing foreign substances that naturally caused gastric trouble. He thought the verdict of the Jury would be that he died from chronic gastro-intestinal inflammation, and if they wished to add that it was caused by swallowing foreign substances they could do so.

The Foreman (Mr. H. J. Johnson): Yes, we will add that to the verdict.

The Coroner recorded the verdict accordingly.

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