

**Gladys Maria Hay Peiniger**

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**A MENTAL HOSPITAL TRAGEDY.**

**WOMAN PATIENT'S SAD END.**

A tragedy such as has fortunately seldom happened at the County Mental Hospital occurred this week when Mrs. Gladys Maria Hay Peiniger, wife of a retired major of the Royal Artillery, residing at Wootton, who was a voluntary patient at the institution, disappeared while out for a walk on Monday afternoon, and was found dead hanging from a hazel bough in Marvel-copse, about three-quarters of a mile from the hospital, by searchers on the following morning.

**THE INQUEST**

The Acting Deputy Coroner (W.H.P.F. Thirkell, Esq.), held an inquiry into the tragedy at the County Mental Hospital on Wednesday. P.S. Brooker and P.C. Whillier were the police officers present, and Mr. A. Denham was elected foreman of the jury.

Alexander Harold Gordon Peiniger, a retired major, residing at Rosemary Cottage, Wootton Bridge, identified the body as that of his wife, who was 50 years of age. She had been a voluntary patient at the hospital since March of last year, after having been in a nursing home following a nervous breakdown. He last saw her at the hospital on the previous Monday, when she was quite bright, and he arranged to come to see her again the next day. He never thought she would destroy herself although she had said she was tired of life owing to the state of her nerves. Her bodily health was good.

Lilian Payne, a nurse at the hospital, deposed that at about 2.30 on Monday afternoon Mrs. Peiniger came to her to get her parole card, which witness handed to her.

The Coroner here explained that deceased had given her word of honour to obey the rules of the Institution and under those conditions was allowed out at certain hours provided she took her parole card, which was given up on her return.

Witness added that as she gave her the card Mrs. Peiniger seemed quite normal. Witness had seen her almost daily for three months. She had always found her normal and had never heard her threaten to destroy herself.

Albert Edward Glassonbury, hall porter at the hospital, stated that at 5.30 a.m. on Tuesday he was among a search party from the institution looking for Mrs. Peiniger, who was reported as missing since 2.30 p.m. on the previous day. At 10.25 a.m. he was in Marvel-copse with one of the nurses when he saw the body of the deceased hanging, suspended by the lady's silk belt (produced) from a hazel tree. Death had evidently taken place some hours. He immediately fetched the medical superintendent. The feet were just touching the ground and there was a little mound of earth close by. She had apparently stepped from the mound after putting the belt round her neck, and although her feet were just touching the ground sufficient pressure was exerted to cause strangulation, as the belt was tight round her neck. A noose had been formed by placing one end through a bone ring-buckle at the other end. In reply to a juror (Mr. H. Morris) witness said he did not think there was any necessity to cut the body down as the woman had evidently been dead for a long time and *rigor mortis* had set in.

Dr. Charles Davies Jones, medical superintendent of the hospital, told the Coroner and jury that the deceased was admitted to the hospital at her own request on March 19<sup>th</sup>. She undertook to obey the rules and to give 72 hours' notice of her intention to leave, the conditions required by the Mental Treatment

Act. She had a side room on the ground floor and neither her door nor window was locked. She was free to go in and out as she chose. Her mental state did not warrant any restriction. Her general nervous condition much improved under treatment, but she was depressed and did not take her food or sleep well. She was very introspective and brooded over the idea that she would never get better. He could not find any evidence that she had threatened to destroy herself. She eagerly looked forward to her husband's frequent visits and her condition was steadily improving. A week before her death she made a request that she might be allowed to walk outside the institution unaccompanied by a nurse during certain hours, and this he granted. She had gone out alone a number of times since then and returned in good time. On Monday she left at 2.30 p.m. and as she had not returned at 6 p.m. a search was instituted and continued throughout the night until the discovery of the body. Her husband and the police were informed of her absence. When witness heard of the discovery of the body he went at once in his car to Marvel-copse. Death had taken place at least 12 hours previously. The belt had been so placed that it would cause almost immediate unconsciousness by preventing blood reaching the brain. Deceased probably died in a faint due to that restriction. Death was due to strangulation. He and P.C. Whillier released the body. It was rather remarkable that the belt was tied to the bough by a bow instead of a knot, and all they had to do to release her was to pull the end. His inference from that was that deceased might have been experimenting and probably hoped to have time to change her mind and release the bow; in other words that she was "just trying it on." – In reply to questions Dr. Jones said he quite realised that in allowing patients on parole he was running a risk but he thought it well worth it in view of the proved beneficial effect it had on the minds of patients so treated. Every care was taken to ensure that a patient was mentally capable of enjoying such freedom without running undue risk, and deceased had never given him a moment's anxiety. The parole method of treatment was applied to both voluntary and certified patients. Nearly 80 were on parole and he was confident that they had greatly benefited from the freedom. He was strongly opposed to the hospital being looked upon as a prison. Those cards were issued with the definite purpose of getting patients fit to leave the institution, and those enjoying the privilege had behaved remarkably well. The deceased doubtless acted on a sudden impulse. – The Foreman said he knew Mrs. Peiniger well by sight having frequently seen her out with a nurse. She was always most careful to keep out of the way of traffic.

P.C. Whillier said deceased had evidently fixed the belt round her neck and to the bough and then stepped off a little bank.

The Coroner said that under the circumstances explained by the medical superintendent no blame could be attached to the hospital staff for that unfortunate occurrence. It would have been quite a different thing if the deceased had been a patient with a seriously unbalanced mind who had not been properly guarded.

The jury expressed agreement with these remarks and returned a verdict of suicide during temporary insanity.