

HOSPITAL SCANDAL.

COUNTY OFFICIALS IN A CONSPIRACY OF SILENCE.

From Etta Dearborn's Grave Rises the Story of the Concealment by County Officials of Her Violent Death.

Horried Friends Bring to Light the Hidden Circumstances of Her Hasty Burial in the Potter's Field.

An Inquest at Which the Only Witness Was the Man Most Anxious to Suppress General Knowledge of the Facts.

From the grave of Etta Dearborn has arisen a cry of protest against the shameful secrecy and indecent haste with which she was hurried into her grave by two county officials. The futile attempt of Dr. Bryant of the County Hospital, aided by Coroner L. T. Holland, to suppress the unpleasant fact that the hospital attendants had allowed to an insane woman patient an opportunity to hang herself, has resulted in ten times the scandal and notoriety which would have ensued had matters been allowed to take their proper course, and no effort made to hide every detail of the affair, as if it were a disgraceful secret.

The inquest over the dead girl's body was held without a jury, the fact of the girl's death was hidden from the newspapers, no notice was given to the press of the inquest, either before or after it was held, and the only witness was Dr. Bryant himself, an interested party, the man who before the inquest began avowed to the Coroner that it was his desire to keep the facts from general knowledge. The attendants who supposedly ought to have known most about the alleged suicide, were not summoned as witnesses, and the Coroner accepted as testimony Dr. Bryant's statement of what those attendants would have said if they had been present. For all Coroner Holland knows, Dr. Bryant may have hanged the girl himself.

The dead woman's story is a pitiful one. Etta Dearborn was the daughter of an Indian mother, and a father of Scotch-Irish descent. Her parents are dead, and she was without means or friends. Three times lately she has been in the hospital. On leaving the hospital after her last illness she was thrown upon the world practically helpless. Mrs. Amanda Van Vooth gave her a home, and Adolph Muhlmann, a young German, taking pity on her forlorn lot, offered to make her his wife. A week ago the girl wandered away in a fit of dementia, was picked up on the street by the police, and sent to the County Hospital. Mrs. Van Vooth and Muhlmann visited her last Sunday and promised to come again the next day with official permission to take her away with them.

They left the girl overjoyed at the thought of deliverance. The next day—last Monday—word was brought to Mrs. Van Vooth that in a fit of madness the girl had hanged herself with a strap.

The hospital authorities were exceedingly anxious that such goings-on should not be known to have happened in the institution. The Coroner was notified, and besought by Dr. Bryant not to let the story get out—for professional courtesy.

The Coroner demurred at first, undoubtedly realizing what a preposterous request Dr. Bryant was making, but finally yielded—for professional courtesy.

The body was taken to Howry's undertaking establishment Monday morning, and at 9 o'clock on the morning of the following day the inquest, if so perfunctory and secret an affair deserves to be called by that name, was held by Coroner Holland. All dispatch and all possible quiet was observed. The Coroner dispensed altogether with a jury—a most unusual and questionable proceeding, considering that it was a violent death that was being investigated and not some mere case of death from disease without the attendance of a physician.

None of the woman's friends were present. No representative of the press was there, nor had any newspaper received the slightest inkling that such an inquest was to be held. The nurses who had attended the girl, the attendants who are said to have seen the corpse with the strap about its neck, the people who were familiar with the facts concerning the girl's history, and condition, were none of them present, with the single exception of Dr. Bryant himself, the public official who had asked another public official for the sake of professional courtesy to hide facts which their duty demanded should be investigated in the full light of day. Dr. Bryant, the man who most of all had reason to desire that the facts should be kept secret, and who had avowed that desire openly to the Coroner before the inquest, was the sole witness. He had been directed by the Coroner to bring such other witnesses as might be needed, but he had brought not one.

Dr. Bryant made a statement of the case, which was taken down by the Coroner's clerk. He related what he knew of his own personal knowledge about the affair, also repeated hearsay evidence about the girl's death. He told what the witnesses he ought to have brought would have said if they had come, and this hearsay evidence satisfied the Coroner.

The inquest over, the body was hurriedly prepared for the grave, nalled up in a rough redwood box, and with unseemly haste hurried to the potter's field. By 2 o'clock of the afternoon of the day of the inquest—last Tuesday—Etta Dearborn was only a name in the county records, an unmarked corpse in grave 9, row 24, block 4 of the paupers' field in the county burying ground.

Mrs. Van Vooth had been prostrated by the death of the girl she had befriended. Half an hour after the coffin had been started for the burying ground, she called at Howry's and asked to see the body of Etta Dearborn. Through a misunderstanding the attendant showed her the body of Annie Segelking, another patient of the County Hospital, who died there from the effects of accidental burns. Mrs. Van Vooth was horrified at the apparent change in the appearance of the body. When she examined the breast for an unmistakable birthmark and found it wanting she realized that this was not the body of Etta Dearborn. At first she was filled with terror at the thought that the body might have been taken to the dissecting room. On learning his mistake, the attendant assured her that he had merely misunderstood what body it was she wished to see, and announced that Miss Dearborn had been buried that same day.

Mrs. Van Vooth went away indignant at the haste with which the body of the poor girl had been hurried off to the potter's field, without letting her friends know anything of the arrangements and without affording them any opportunity to so much as accompany the body to the grave. The dead woman was a Catholic, and it had been the wish of her friends that she should be buried in consecrated ground. The fact that the suicide was committed

in madness would have made it possible for permission to have been secured for interment in the Catholic Cemetery.

"It is a shame," said Mrs. Van Vooth yesterday, "that Etta Dearborn should have been buried without anyone knowing anything about it, simply because she was poor."

The newspapers were not told a word about her death. No death notice was printed. No one knew anything about her death, or about her funeral. How were her friends to find out about it—and she may have other friends somewhere—if nothing is made known. She was a good girl, thoroughly virtuous and lady-like, and her friends ought to have had an opportunity to do something for her."

The whole story of the suicide and of the shameless attempt to hush it up in order to spare the reputations of the officials of the County Hospital from possible blemish, might never have been made known, had it not been that in the first suspicion that the body might have been used as a cadaver, Mrs. Van Vooth went to the Chief of Police, who paid no attention to her story. The incident was made public by the accidental presence of a reporter, and the officials were compelled to tell of their connection with the case.

Dr. Holland's explanation rests wholly on the claim that "professional courtesy" justifies a public official in hiding the fact that a violent death has taken place in a public institution.

"Dr. Bryant asked me not to say anything to the reporters about the case," said Coroner Holland, yesterday, "and as a matter of professional courtesy to him I did not do so. The reporters didn't ask me anything about the case, and so I didn't volunteer any information. The only reason that occurs to me why Dr. Bryant wished nothing to be said about the suicide was that it might seem to cast a reflection upon the hospital authorities that a patient was allowed an opportunity to make away with herself. I tried to keep the matter quiet just to oblige Dr. Bryant. I had no other motive than that."

"Have there been other instances when Coroner's cases have been covered up to oblige some one? Are there other such cases buried in the records?"

"No; so far as I know, this is the only time it has occurred," was the answer to the question. "So far as the inquest itself goes, it was perfectly regular. The law gives me discretionary power as to when I shall impanel a jury, and when hold an inquest without one. This inquest was held at Howry's, the testimony reported, and the history of the case entered in the records of the Coroner's office."

In order to make his stand more definite, Dr. Holland prepared the following signed statement:

"The case of the suicide from the County Hospital was reported to me from Howry's by Dr. Bryant, and whether by implication or otherwise I got the impression that the matter reflected a little unfavorably on the authorities, that an insane should be permitted to get hold of the means with which to commit suicide; and I was asked to say nothing whereby it would come to the knowledge of the reporters, to which proposition I demurred, but finally consented, only because of professional courtesy. I held an inquest as regularly as any of which there is record in the office of the Coroner of Los Angeles county, gave a death certificate and an order for the interment of the remains in the County Cemetery, and left the body in the morgue at Howry's."

L. T. HOLLAND.

Dr. Holland says that no such incident will occur again, so long as he is Coroner.

Dr. Bryant called at The Times office last night to explain his part in the mystery. He said he tried to keep the matter quiet because the fact that a patient had been allowed opportunity to commit suicide, if made known, would "hurt the hospital." As the County Hospital is not an institution that depends upon popularity for patronage, the doctor's explanation does not explain. If he had said he feared the occurrence might encourage criticism of the officials having charge of the hospital, his explanation would have been pertinent, if not satisfactory. Dr. Bryant admitted that he had requested the Coroner and the Health Officer to withhold the facts from the reporters, and that he had not produced at the inquest the witnesses who could have given direct evidence in the case but had given hearsay testimony. As a matter of absolute fact, he did not know that the girl hanged herself, and so far as the direct and competent evidence showed, the Coroner did not know that the girl was not hanged by a hospital attendant.

From Dr. Bryant's statement of the case, it is very clear that the hospital attendants were negligent and careless in permitting an insane woman to obtain possession of a shawl strap, and that after securing the strap, she was left to her own devices for an hour, although the attendant had only two insane patients to watch.

Dr. Bryant "squared" the evening papers and prevented them from publishing even the fact that Etta Dearborn was dead.

The Coroner's clerk says all the witnesses in the case were subpoenaed and that Dr. Bryant was requested to bring the attendants to the inquest. Dr. Bryant denies this, and says the only summons he had was a telephone

message, sent during his absence, telling him of the hour fixed for the inquest."