

The Case of Jessie Woods

Entering the archive puts me on edge. The rows and rows of files representing myriad of lives reside on each shelf as I walk past. I can feel the dust seep into my lungs, forcing me to cough through their stories. There are no windows here; the archives are kept in the university's basement – lives hiding beneath the threat of water pipes. It's always quiet here, uncomfortably quiet as if time has frozen in place.

I can feel the deadline creeping up on the horizon, but I know I must push on if I want to write that research paper. Names and faces drift through my mind as passing thoughts. I flick through pages, waiting to discover their meaning.

That's when I came across her: Miss Jessie Woods. She was a private patient at Sunnyside Royal Asylum in Montrose. She was recorded entering the asylum on the 3rd of February 1898, and was believed to be a victim of delusion, mania, and self-inflicted harm. There was no photo in her case notes but she did have a rare treasure: letters.

Jessie Woods
Sunnyside Royal Asylum

Admitted February 3rd 1898 at 8pm
Dr David House

Insanity, Delusions, Self-inflicted harm

Statement

Single. Unemployed. Protestant. Age 27. Private patient. No children. Abode 17 Springfield Street, Dundee. Living with sister's family. First attack age 25. No treatment before. Cause: love affair with Mr Knoxville. Lost a child. Suicidal. Self-inflicted harm to arms by biting. Not epileptic. Not dangerous to others. Chargeable to Dundee from February 3rd 1898. Nearest relative Jane Murdock, sister, 17 Springfield Street, Dundee.

Belief

1. She says that Mr Knoxville has taken her daughter from her and is in league with the Devil. She says God has told her that the Devil feasts on her child and will soon go after her sister's children. She says God will spare her family if she kills herself.
2. Her sister, Mrs Murdock, informs me that Miss Woods has been experiencing delusions since she was a child. She tells me Miss Woods lives with her as she began to threaten their parents. She says the affair with Mr Knoxville made her worse. She says her sister began to speak through God, her voice quickening.
3. Miss Woods bites her arms when under stress. She believes it releases her from the Devil's sights. She wants to write to her sister; "My sister is the only one who understands me, I need to warn her of the coming dangers - her youngest will be taken by the Devil" she tells me.

History

Mrs Murdock says that Miss Woods has been experiencing delusions since she was a child. She says that Miss Woods would curse their family for restricting her and refused to attend church. She says that their parents asked her to leave when she turned 23 as the delusions were turning into threats. After the affair was made public, Miss Woods began to bite her arms. Her sister was worried for her children's safety with Miss Woods' growing violent tendencies.

Mental Condition

Calm upon admission. Seems nervous around the nurses and is wary of leaving her sister. Miss Woods tends to speak faster when talking to herself, claiming it is God talking through her. At first, she did not want to tell me about her child but once her sister addressed the issue, she was more open to talking about it. Says she has to kill herself to please God and protect her child from the Devil - thus resulting in her suicidal tendencies.

Physical Examination

Body condition: Good. Healthy heartbeat. No bowel issues. Healthy diet. Arms are covered in self-inflicted bites. Menstrual cycle regular. From my examination, I believe her to be suffering from insanity and delusion alongside her self-inflicted harm and suicidal tendencies.

1898

February 19th

Miss Woods is not adapting to the treatment or routine. She says that we are keeping her child from her and imprisoning her. She says that God will strike us down.

March 18th

Miss Woods is growing violent. She warns other patients' that God has damned their children as well. Last Thursday she began to have night terrors, disturbing other patients. She has now moved rooms and her night terrors have not returned.

28th

Miss Woods has been allowed to write letters to her sister. She believes that keeping her close will help her treatment.

April 5th

Hallucinations worsening. Night terrors returned resulting in another move. She believes the attendants are attempting to poison her, She refuses to participate in outdoor activities believing it below her. She says,

"I will not work, I have never needed to work - I refuse to be paraded around - I will not mingle or talk, I am fine and should not be here."

19th

Believes she is not insane. She says that she is here by the Devil's command.

May 4th

She still refuses proper treatment. Talks about rituals to summon harm to others. Violent towards other patients, and attendants growing fearful of her violence.

28th

Adapting better to treatment. Less of a danger to other patients.

July 3rd

At present Miss Woods seems to have improved. She still refuses to participate with other patients but routine is bringing her peace. Delusions of her daughter still strong and believes that her daughter wants to visit her. She says the child is growing rapidly but fears this is because of the Devil's influence. She has named her Margaret after her mother. She asks to also send her mother letters too. Her sister says this will be impossible as their mother will not speak to her.

29th

Miss Woods ran away yesterday. She made it into Montrose but was soon caught. She had found a young girl whom she claimed was her daughter and attacked the mother. Yet she was soon caught and returned to the asylum. Moved rooms.

August 22nd

Mother confirms Miss Woods' delusions in childhood. Mother says that Miss Woods would curse her for making her attend church. Father refuses to speak. A possible different cause of insanity. At present, Miss Woods has remained quiet.

30th

Night terrors have returned. She says she is tortured by the Devil and fears that she will soon be possessed by him. Moved to another room.

Physical Examination

September 19th

Whilst bathing, Matron reports signs of deep bruising. Miss Woods claims she did not inflict these. She says,

"Mr Knoxville visited me last night - his horns had grown to an obscene height; the Devil can no longer be hidden. He tells me he will soon come for me, the same way he came for our daughter - heinous beast"

Heart normal. Menstrual cycle regular. Bowels regular. Night terrors have not returned.

October 5th

Miss Woods says God's voice is growing fainter and the Devil grows stronger. Further treatment is required.

17th

Miss Woods has begun to work in the laundromat. She has made a friend with another private patient, Mrs Alice Taylor, who convinced her to work there. She speaks fondly of Mrs Taylor but warns of the Devil's watchful eye.

November 14th

Nothing to report.

December 13th

Moved rooms due to night terrors. Demands audience with a priest wants to warn him of the Devil's coming. Biting has worsened. Warns me that Mr Knoxville is coming for her.

1899

January 24th

Miss Woods struck out against Miss Louisa Adams, an attendant, during a scuffle with Miss Woods as Miss Adams tried to get her up this morning. She warns me that the devil has taken Miss Adams and has sent her to tempt Miss Woods. Miss Woods says,

"That fiend's red eyes haunt my terrors, I was warned of her coming. There will be no rest for any of us as long as she is here."

30th

She has moved rooms again due to growing violent tendencies towards other patients. Believes that their insanity is a work of the Devil. She argues that she is simply protecting herself.

February 12th

As a result of a continuing rise in violent tendencies towards other patients and attendants, Miss Woods will be moving to Morningside Royal Asylum, Edinburgh.

Register of Accidents to Patients, Officers, or Attendants

Sunnyside Royal Asylum

Date

Depiction of Accident

September 19th
1898

This morning, Miss Jessie Woods, a private patient, was found to have severe bruising down her left side whilst bathing. Further examination of Miss Woods' body shows no internal damage but does reveal that her self-inflicted biting has worsened. Miss Woods claims she was harmed by Mr Knoxville, but there is no evidence of this.

Dr. Charles Smith

Register of Accidents to Patients,
Officers, or Attendants
Sunnyside Royal Asylum

Date

January 24th
1899

Depiction of Accident

When trying to get Miss Jessie Woods, a private patient, out of bed this morning, Miss Louisa Adams, an attendant, was attacked by Miss Woods. Miss Adams' face has been deeply scratched and has sprained her right arm as a result. Miss Woods claims Miss Adams' has been possessed by the devil, and that she was trying to protect herself. No evidence.

Dr. Arnold Williams

March 30th 1898

My Dearest Jane,

This place is a nightmare, I get no peace — they are constantly watching me like I am some sort of monster; HE is the real monster. God tells me He watches over you with a faithful eye — you are safe, for now, but He fears your children are in danger; you will be a monster too —

May 3rd 1898

My Dearest Jane,

You are the only one who understands me, here I am lost between other patients. I'm up from sunrise, made to scrub, made to eat amongst others I would never be near in our society - I am imprisoned here when all I want is to be with my daughter, Margaret; God tells me she is handsome, she will never struggle in life with her prestige - we must ensure this... I know they hide her letters from me, God tells me so - I need to see Margaret, I need to make sure she is safe from harm.

Yours,

Jessie



UNDELIVERED

July 10th 1898

My own darling Mama,

I have decided to name my daughter Margaret, after you — she is as beautiful as you are and carries your character in her frame; God has blessed her with natural rewards. He tells me that you must watch out for her and warn others of Mr Knoxville for he is possessed by the Devil — he will trick you if you are not wary; you must protect the family for he threatens their lives. I know Margaret wants to see me, she has plans to meet with me soon; we will reunite, we WILL.

Yours,

Jessie

July 25th 1898

My Dearest Jane,

My Margaret tells me she is coming for me, we will soon be together - God promises me that she will be safe from harm's way, but I must protect her from the devils' hands that bleed through my nightmares. We must pray for her soul as I pray for your sons; Satan will fall as we strike out against him -

September 12th 1898

My Dearest Jane,

The Devil is growing closer to your son; we must hide him out of sight, do not let him out of the house for I fear he will be taken — God is growing fainter and I fear for my sanity without him, the Devil's warmth calls me in, his fire providing heat in God's absence. The routine drags on — they think I am insane, but they mock me in their routine; I fear if I follow it, I will become the same as the farm animals, simply living to be eaten.

Yours,

Jessie

November 29th 1898

My Dearest Jane,

I am growing tired of this place — I have found company, but she is not as intellectual as you are, I feel myself growing tired; the Devil warns me of her disease and says she is one of his own. For the time being, the Devil says he will leave your son as he turns his attention to the bigger picture; he warns of the coming end and that I must side with him to protect those I love; God warns me of the Devil's influence; it will not be long before he takes me.

Yours,

Jessie

February 5th 1899

My Dearest Jane,

I fear the Devil is crawling into my mind, he whispers his secrets in my ear - threatening the life of my child; he tells me my only escape is to hurt; I fear that I must protect her and follow his orders, it is my only hope for peace. The attendants have grown in number and walk around the corridors dressed in angelic white, mocking me; they drive me mad; they try to get us to paint the walls and decorate this prison, pretending it is our home. The Devil laughs at their endeavours to push him out, they will never be free.

Yours,

Jessie

As I turn over the last page I am met with a sense of unease. What happened to Jessie? Did she find a cure at the next asylum? Or did she face more horrors in her mind? I would never know the true answers. These never-ending questions fall into the pit of my stomach and sink. If the Jessie knew I was looking into her life, would she approve? Would she curse me and my eyes, like the doctors, reading her thoughts for answers?

It was now raining outside; I could hear water trickle down the windows and perhaps even threaten the safety of these papers. I left my desk and found myself moving closer to the elements. I wondered how long it had been raining. I stood there, staring out the window and into the streets beyond. How many people had walked through this way...would I ever know? Years down the line, would I be someone's Jessie — a patchy faded document, pored over by prying eyes. Scanning the pages, wondering why I moved in the way that I did. I wanted to know, I needed to know. Yet, I could be just as lost as Jessie.