

*Case communicated by Dr. CARR H. ROBERTS, L.R.C.P., M.R.C.S.E., L.S.A., Shrewsbury, England.*

In July of last year (1876), being at that time joint medical officer of health to the Alderbury Union, at Salisbury, in Wiltshire, I was requested by the coroner to make, in conjunction with my friend and colleague, Dr. Gordon, a *post mortem* examination on the body of an infant, which was discovered by the police under the following circumstances :—

An anonymous communication was received by post, at the city police station, stating that if the police searched the houses in a certain court in the city, they would find a dead body. A number was given; but, on a policeman being instructed to go there, he found no such number, and returned, thinking it a fruitless errand. The superintendent, Mr. Matthews, however, being a sharp and shrewd man, resolved to have the matter thoroughly sifted, and a house to house investigation was instituted, with the result that, on coming to a certain house, they found a woman sitting in a room down stairs, where was a large fire with a saucepan on it, apparently boiling. From her appearance and information received, she was taxed with having been recently confined. This she at first strenuously denied, but ultimately confessed, with the qualifying remark, that "it was only a little one." On being asked where it was, she replied "there," and pointed to the saucepan. On the lid of the saucepan being removed, something *tied up* in a cloth was seen, which, on being out and untied, was found to be the body of an infant child. The woman was, of course, taken into custody, and the saucepan with its contents removed to the station house. This being late in the evening the *post mortem* was made the following morning, when the remains presented the following appearance :—

It appeared to be the body of a full grown, fully developed male child, which had been doubled up so that the head nearly touched the toes, and tied up in an ordinary cloth, as a cook would tie up a pudding. The umbilical cord appeared to have been either broken or torn, it certainly was not cut, and from seven to ten inches in length. It was impossible, even had it been material, to judge the length on account of its shrunken state. One arm on one side, and one thigh on the other, were separated from their respective sockets, and the whole of the body presented more the appearance of extremely overboiled veal than anything else I could

compare it to. The contents of the chest were utterly disorganized, and so completely, as to be almost unrecognizable. The bowels were not quite so bad, and were quite empty; there was, as we thought, a trace of meconium, but it was quite evident that no food had been administered. The whole of the body was covered from head to foot with small pustules or blisters, each containing fluid of a greenish yellow, or rather a straw color, and this fluid was, in every case, either in a higher or lesser degree of coagulation. The bones of the skull were completely separated, and the contents had almost entirely disappeared. Whether there had been any violence used was, of course, impossible to judge, the body had been so completely boiled that there was no line of redness to be made out; the weather was intensely hot, but there was no sign of putrefaction.

The woman (who was a widow, her husband having died about six months previously, after suffering for more than a year from sickness, which would utterly preclude the possibility of copulation even, far less that of procreation) was committed for trial by both the magistrates and the coroner's jury, on the charge of "wilful murder," and was tried at the following assizes, in the autumn, at Winchester, and after a protracted trial was acquitted of the capital charge, but found guilty (indeed, pleaded so) to concealment of birth, and sentenced to imprisonment for fifteen months, she having already been in prison nearly four; two years, unless I am mistaken, being the maximum for that offence.

*Remarks.*—The interest and excitement that this case caused, of course, arose not merely from the (I believe) unparalleled attempt to dispose of an infant in this unique manner, but from the question as to whether the child was put into the water *alive or dead*. Horrible and atrocious as the former supposition may be, I could come to no other conclusion than that it was so, on account of the blisters on the body containing serum, or a fluid strongly resembling it. I have since, I understand, been asked in an indirect matter, "What tests, if any, were applied." I would ask what tests could be applied? the lungs were gone, and as for testing for albumen, the fact that the contents of some of the blisters were coagulated and some not, were to me conclusive. I know no animal, that, on being subjected to the action of intense heat after death will have blisters containing *fluid*, containing *air* alone is a different matter. In this county, and I presume in many others, it is a common thing after