

MEDICAL JURISPRUDENCE.

Discovery of Arsenic in a Body after Eight Years' Interment.—*Westbury, Wilts.*—In consequence of the recent inquest here, at which a verdict of "wilful murder" was returned against Rebecca Smith for procuring the death of her infant child by the administration of poison, it was deemed advisable to exhumed some of the bodies of the nine other children, who have all died in infancy. Accordingly, on the 11th inst., two bodies were disinterred from the burying-ground of the Baptist chapel at Bratton, in this parish, under the superintendence of Mr. Shorland, surgeon of Westbury, by whom the remains were taken to Mr. Herapath, of Bristol, for analysis. A coroner's inquest sat on that day, which was adjourned till this day, after taking evidence of the identity of the exhumed bodies.

At the resumed sitting Mr. Shorland described the state in which he forwarded the bodies to Mr. Herapath, after which that gentleman gave the following evidence:—"On the 12th inst., on my return from Exeter, I found at my laboratory a large square shallow box, on which the cover was sealed down with a crest similar to that on Mr. Shorland's seal. This seal was perfect. The box was divided into three compartments by two divisions: in one of which was a portion of soil tied up in a handkerchief. In the next compartment I found a mass of earth and the remains of a coffin exceedingly decomposed and penetrated in all directions by the roots of a tree. There was a label in Mr. Shorland's handwriting on the top of this, to this effect:—'Sarah Smith, born July 18, 1841; died August 7, 1841; aged 29 days.' Upon carefully removing portions of the soil, I found the remains of an infant, evidently very young, as there were no teeth in the sockets of the jaw, with the exception of one toothbud on the front of the lower jaw. The texture of the body was entirely gone, and the bones were all separated from each other. I took some of the bones and subjected them to analysis, when I found in them traces of arsenic. I then took some of the black mould from the interior of the skull, and in that I also found traces of arsenic. I then sought for some of the black mould between the ribs, and nearer the region of the stomach, and there I found arsenic in greater quantity; specimens of which I produce." Mr. Herapath then exhibited tubes containing arsenious acid, metallic arsenic, Scheele's green, and orpiment, produced by various tests, and continued:—"This, I believe, is the first instance on record of arsenic being discovered after an interment of eight years; and I wish it to be circulated throughout the country that years have no effect in removing traces of arsenic. In the third compartment I found also the remains of an infant, with a label in Mr. Shorland's handwriting, as follows:—'Edward Smith, born June 14, 1844; died June 29, 1844; aged 15 days.' This body and coffin were nearly in the same state as the others; the bones below the knees were wanting. The roots of trees as large as my little finger had passed through the head and skeleton, and had followed the bones in all directions. Treating this skeleton as I did the other, I found arsenic in the bones, in the black mould under the head, and a greater quantity in the black mould under the ribs. I produce specimens of metallic arsenic, and the other tests, which are even more distinct than those in the last case; this is after an interment of five years and one month."

The Coroner.—From the statement you have made, and from your analysis, have you any doubt that arsenic was administered during life?

Mr. Herapath.—I have never found arsenic in a body which was in a natural state; and I mention this to correct the ridiculous notions which have gone abroad, owing to some sayings which have been attributed to the French chemists. Raspail, for instance, is reported to have said that he could produce arsenic from the legs of chairs, and Orfila that he could do so from the common soil. I have made experiments on hundreds of bodies of human beings and brutes, but have never discovered arsenic unless it had been administered medicinally or for a criminal purpose. I have also made many experiments on soils, and I believe the statement of Orfila to be a mistaken one. My opinion is, that arsenic was administered to both these children during life, and that it was the cause of death; it existed in too great a quantity to have been administered for a medicinal purpose.

The Jury, without hesitation, returned a verdict "That the

deceased children died from the effects of arsenic, but how or by whom administered there is no evidence to show."

The discovery of arsenic in the bones is very unusual, as it is not deposited in these organs by absorption. A case was recently reported in the last volume of the *London Medical Gazette*, page 394, in which arsenic was detected in the remains of a body after an interment of fourteen years.—*London Medical Gazette*.

The Plea of Insanity in Criminal Cases.—The Case of John Gleeson Wilson.—The case of Wilson, recently convicted of murder at the Liverpool Assizes, presents many points of interest in relation to the plea of insanity in criminal cases. The following graphic summary of the facts proved on the trial is taken from the *London Times*, Saturday, August 25:—

"Mary Henrichson, was the wife of a respectable merchant captain residing in Liverpool, but absent, at the time we speak of, on the high seas. She lived, with a single servant and her two sons, of the ages of five and three years respectively, in a small but decent dwelling-house, a portion of which she was in the habit of letting off to increase a somewhat scanty income, and satisfy with more facility the claims of her landlord. In the afternoon of the 27th of March last, a man named John Gleeson Wilson called to look at the apartments, and presently agreed to take them on the terms proposed. This was on a Tuesday, and that evening at ten o'clock, he took up his quarters in the room, and slept there. Next morning he went out, and returned again about eleven o'clock, just as Mrs. Henrichson was going on her usual errands to the market. What follows we may now tell straightforward, for if ever a case was indisputably proved in all its details, it is certainly this. As soon as the poor woman had quitted the house Wilson went into the front parlor, which was not one of the rooms he had taken for himself, and there found the servant polishing the grate, with the two children playing about her. These he drove out of the room in a jocular manner, and then, taking up the tongs from the grate, inquired the price for which such a set of fire-irons could be obtained. Before the girl could answer he struck her a violent blow upon the skull, which left her senseless on the floor. The noise attracted the eldest boy to the spot, who was instantly butchered with the same weapon. The murderer then went into the scullery, where the younger boy was trying to hide himself, caught him, and with a carving knife which he found there, severed his head from his body all but a slight strip of skin. Three lives had thus been taken in little more than as many minutes; but the tragedy was not complete. In a short time, as the assassin knew, Mrs. Henrichson was to return from market. He planted himself in the lobby, and as she entered struck her down with the poker and beat her skull to atoms. He then went up stairs, ransacked the drawers, and quitted the house with all the valuables it contained in less than one hour from the time of the first blow, and in less than twelve from his first acquaintance with the family."

"Quick, however, as had been the butchery, the discovery and the retribution were scarcely slower. Before the clock had struck twelve the deed had been detected, and the officers of justice were upon the spot. Fortunately the poor servant girl still breathed, and lingered long enough in her agony to supply, by her dying depositions, not, indeed, a link which was wanting in the evidence of the murderer's guilt, but an irresistible and conclusive confirmation of the testimony which a most extraordinary concatenation of circumstances had combined to furnish. At twelve o'clock the assassin was seen walking away in a direction leading naturally from the scene of his crimes; and it is not a little remarkable that though he carried no obvious vestiges of his bloody business about him, yet something in his manner seems to have so rivetted the attention of all persons whom he successively met, that his identity was sworn to without the smallest hesitation. At half-past 12 he was again seen, in a field near the town, washing his boots and trousers in a pit, and on this spot were found his handkerchief and the envelope of a letter which was sworn to have been in his possession that morning. Half an hour afterwards he offered Mrs. Henrichson's gold watch for sale at a pawnbroker's, and 15 minutes after this he purchased a new pair of trousers, and exchanged them in the shop for those he had on. This brings him nearly to 1 o'clock. Between 2 and 3 he entered another shop and bought a pair of