

The results of some experiments on this subject were as follows: fifteen grains of finely-powdered opium were infused, for twenty hours, with six drachms of boiling distilled water. On examination, the filtered infusion was found to contain 4 per cent of solid matter, i.e., of the soluble part of opium. In another experiment, opium sliced was employed with water in the same proportions. The quantity dissolved averaged, on several trials, from 3 to 4 per cent, depending on the proportion of water, and the length of contact. By boiling the residue in each case a further quantity of meconate of morphia was obtained, showing that an aqueous infusion, while it will not extract the whole of the meconate at once, will yet take up sufficient to render it actively poisonous to young children.

Prussic Acid.—It has been a seriously debated question among medical jurists, whether an individual, after having swallowed a strong dose of prussic acid, could retain the power of performing certain acts indicative of volition and the preservation of sense. Two cases have occurred within the last year in England, which throw some additional light upon this important question, on which a charge of murder may sometimes depend. In one case, the deceased, an adult, swallowed three drachms of prussic acid from the phial in which it was contained, while another person was in the room with his back turned to him. This individual was alarmed by hearing the deceased exclaim "it's gone," and in answer to a question put by witness, said, "I have taken it." He was again about to speak, but his articulation failed him, he became insensible, and died immediately afterwards.

The other case was referred to me from Suffolk, by Mr. Newham, surgeon of Bury St. Edmunds. In March, 1844, a commercial traveller was found dead in his bed at an inn. The evidence given at the inquest showed that he had died from the effects of prussic acid, and there could not be the slightest doubt that he had taken the poison himself. The point of interest connected with the case is, that when discovered dead, he was found lying on his left side in the natural position of rest, the legs being slightly drawn up to the abdomen; the arms bent over the chest; and although rigid, the hands were not clenched, nor did they appear in any way to have been spasmodically affected. The bedclothes were smoothly drawn up to his shoulders, and there was no appearance whatever of disorder about them. On a chair beside the bed, at his back, was a phial holding about six drachms, and still containing a small portion of a liquid smelling strongly of prussic acid, mixed with the essential oil of lemons, which had probably been purposely mixed with it to disguise the odour. This phial was found with the cork in it. Mr. Newham correctly observes, that this condition of things clearly indicates a sequence of several voluntary acts performed by the deceased immediately before death; as, for instance, swallowing the acid from the bottle, then corking the bottle, placing it on a chair at the back of the bed, the turning over in bed, drawing up the bedclothes, and composing himself into a position of rest. From the evidence at the inquest, it appeared that not less than three drachms of prussic acid had been taken, and probably even a larger quantity; and the question arose, whether all the events above mentioned could have occurred between taking into the stomach so large a dose of this poison as to cause death without inducing convulsions, of which there were no signs? The fact that this was really a case of suicide, left it beyond doubt that the deceased had, after swallowing this dose, performed the series of acts above mentioned; and it was equally evident that convulsions had not taken place, at least so as to leave any sign of their existence in the dead body.

The reader will observe that this case is very similar in its details to that of Judith Buswell, for the alleged murder of whom, a young man named Freeman was tried at the Leicester Spring Assizes in 1829. (See *Med. Gazette*, vol. vii. p. 759.) The medical opinions in that case, from a similar series of acts, were rather against the presumption of suicide, and in favour of homicidal interference. It has been supposed, that when a strong dose of prussic acid destroys life so slowly as to give time for the performance of such voluntary acts, this would be indicated by the body being found in a convulsed state; when, on the other hand, death takes place so rapidly that there are no convulsions, then the inference should be that the deceased could not have retained sense or power sufficiently long for the performance of these acts. The above, with other similar cases, proves that we cannot trust to an assumed criterion of this kind. There may be no mark of convulsion about a dead body,—circumstances may show, that

sense, volition, and a power of motion were actually retained for a certain period; and yet all this is compatible with the act being one of suicide from a large dose of prussic acid. We are not justified in inferring that a dose of this kind, when it operates slowly, is always and necessarily indicated by the body of the deceased being found in a convulsed state.

This question has acquired still greater interest from the late trial of Belany for poisoning his wife by prussic acid (*Cent. Crim. Court*, Aug. 1844.) The prisoner declared that the deceased shrieked, and afterwards told him that she had swallowed some "hot liquid." The medical witnesses are reported to have stated (although only from experiments on animals) that this shriek or cry was the immediate precursor of insensibility, and the last act of vitality,—in short that the power of speech would be then entirely lost. Hence the prisoner's statement would be inconsistent with truth. However strong the circumstantial evidence may have been against the accused, and it could scarcely have been stronger,—this medical opinion is not borne out by observation. In one instance, just related (p. 551), a larger dose of the poison was probably taken; but the deceased was able to answer a question and say, "I have taken it," before he became insensible. A very similar case, reported by Dr. Gierl, is to be found in most works on toxicology. These cases then clearly prove that, whether a shriek or cry be a constant accompaniment of poisoning by prussic acid or not,—a point which yet remains to be proved,—an individual may speak and even answer a question rationally after having taken the poison, and immediately before falling into a state of insensibility.

(To be Continued.)

THE

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THE AMERICAN SOCIETY OF DENTAL SURGEONS.

We perceive in the September number of the American Journal and Library of Dental Science, one of the standard medical periodicals of the United States, and the organ of the American Society of Dental Surgeons, a report of the sixth annual meeting of that body, on the 5th of August last. The proceedings, to that class of practitioners more immediately concerned, must partake of considerable interest; but certain resolutions were adopted at an adjourned meeting held on the 9th, which we consider highly important, and deserving of general promulgation. A committee had been appointed to suggest some plan of action for the adoption of the society, in reference to the very prevalent nefarious practice of stopping carious teeth by amalgam. Having obtained the opinion of the most enlightened dentists in the city of New York and Brooklyn on the subject, the committee reported, "that they have deliberated carefully upon the matter referred to them, and that their unanimous opinion is, that any amalgam is not only unfit, but dangerous when used for the purpose of filling carious teeth or their fangs, and they call upon the society to express in decided terms, its disapproval of the practice:" whereupon it was resolved, "That the American Society of Dental Surgeons, under the conviction that any amalgam whatever, used under the name of 'mineral paste,' 'adamantine