

Medico-legal Report on a Case of Attempted Murder [Tentative d'homicide; rapport médico-légal]. (Bull. de la Soc. de Méd. Ment. de Belg., Feb., 1911). Louveaux and Claus.

This report is of special interest on account of the relatively slight direct evidence on which the medical experts succeeded in establishing the irresponsibility of the culprit. The individual in question, a youth, æt. 20, was charged with the attempted murder of his parents. From the evidence it appeared that the old people were attacked while sleeping, and were severely injured by several blows with an axe. The attempt was made in the dark, and when the other members of the family came on the scene at the cries of the victims, the accused took his part in assisting them, and in looking for traces of the assassins. In this, however, he rather over-did his rôle, and showed by various remarks that he had made dispositions before the crime with a view to diverting suspicion from himself. His guilty knowledge was further proved by a puerile pretence of not being able to find the axe with which the crime had been committed, though it had been put back in its usual place, and was easily discoverable, by suggestions that the stains of blood on it were due to rust, and by other silly subterfuges of the same sort. Moreover, direct proof of his culpability was given by the evidence of the younger children, who saw him re-enter his bedroom just after the first cries. It was shown that he had been on very bad terms with his parents, and that he had latterly had a special grievance in their opposition to his choice of a fiancée. The accused from the first protested his innocence, and appears to have shown in his defence a fairly acute appreciation of the force of the several points made against him, meeting all those of much cogency with a flat denial.

The experts who were commissioned to report on his mental state did not see the accused until some fourteen days after the crime. They then found that he presented a transitory anæsthesia of the right cornea, a more permanent anæsthesia of the pharynx, exaggeration of the knee-jerks, and dermatographism. He was mentally obtuse, failed to do simple calculations, and seemed to have a very defective memory. Within a few weeks these symptoms became much less marked; the patient appeared more intelligent, and displayed some degree of moral sensibility which had been previously lacking. At the same time the anæsthesia greatly decreased. Inquiry into the family history showed a strong psychopathic taint. The patient himself had appeared abnormal from childhood; he was dull and troublesome at school, and showed extreme mobility of mood; he suffered from enuresis till the age of eleven. For some three years before the crime the strangeness of his conduct had attracted attention; on two occasions he had pretended to have been the victim of murderous attacks by unknown aggressors, his account of the affair in each instance being plausible and circumstantial, and supported by the evidence of torn garments; he was suspected on pretty good grounds of having been the author of two fires, his apparent motive being to cover the traces of some petty thieving. Shortly before the homicidal attempt he produced a number of anonymous letters slandering his fiancée, which he alleged

that he had received, but which it was subsequently found that he had himself written. Taking into consideration the patient's bad family history, the evidences of morbid temperament which he had shown throughout his life, and more particularly just before the crime, the disorders of sensibility, and the slight mental obtusion detected when he was first examined, and finally the character of the crime and the absurd inadequacy of its presumed motive—taking all these points into account, the experts concluded that the accused “was suffering from a mental disease, and should therefore be regarded as irresponsible.” As to the nature of the affection, they offer two alternative views, *viz.*, either that the patient was in a state of hysterical somnambulism, in which, however, there was so little disturbance of consciousness that he could co-ordinate his actions, and could use his reason to invent a defence, though he could not resist the homicidal auto-suggestion, or, in the alternative, that he was a “psychic degenerate,” with a morbid incapacity to control his impulses. This somewhat wide extension of the limits of legal irresponsibility appears to have been accepted without difficulty, and the patient was sent to a lunatic asylum, where he died two years later without having developed any more definite symptoms.

W. C. SULLIVAN.

Part IV.—Notes and News.

THE MEDICO-PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION OF GREAT BRITAIN AND IRELAND.

The seventieth annual meeting of the association was held at the Royal College of Physicians, Dublin, on Thursday and Friday, July 13th and 14th, 1911, under the presidency of (in the early part), Dr. John Macpherson, and later of the new President, Dr. William R. Dawson.

There were present: Drs. Dora E. Allman, Fletcher Beach, John Bain, J. Shaw Bolton, David Bower, C. Hubert Bond, A. Helen Boyle, James Chambers, R. B. Campbell, M. A. Collins, E. M. Courtenay, Henry Cullinan, W. R. Dawson, Thomas Drapes, J. Francis Dixon, T. O'C. Donelan, J. O'C. Donelan, F. H. Edwards, M. J. Forde, Wm. Graham, John W. Geddes, T. A. Green, R. D. Hotchkis, C. E. Hetherington, John Keay, W. Leggett, R. R. Leeper, Geo. F. May, Colin McDowall, T. W. McDowall, John Macpherson, Marion E. Mackenzie, E. Mapother, Mary E. Martin, John Mills, Alfred Miller, M. J. Nolan, H. Hayes Newington, J. A. Oakshott, F. O'Mara, E. D. O'Neill, P. O'Doherty, J. B. Spence, J. G. Soutar, W. H. B. Stoddart, Rothsay C. Stewart, and R. Percy Smith.

Apologies for absence were received from Drs. Adair, Auden, Bower, Bullen, Bevan-Lewis, Sir R. Brayn, Bowles, Collier, S. Coupland, Carre, Caldecott, Clouston, Marriott Cooke, Benson Cooke, Dickson, Elkins, French, J. E. M. Finch, Gayton, Gaudin, Goodall, Gemmel, Jeffrey, Carlyle Johnstone, Robert Jones, Legge, Lord, Lindsay, Lawless, T. C. Mackenzie, Ivy McKenzie, H. C. Martin, Monnington, P. W. MacDonald, Sir James Moody, J. Middlemass, Morrison, K. D. C. Macrae, G. D. MacRae, A. Newington, F. Needham, J. Neil, Orr, Pearce, Powell, Bedford Pierce, Raws, Rows, G. R. Robertson, W. Ford Robertson, Skinner, Savage, Sankey, Sykes, Simpson, Sall, Shuttleworth, Steele, Steen, Treadwell, Turnbull, A. D. Thompson, D. G. Thomson, J. Turner, F. R. P. Taylor, A. R. Urquhart, E. White, Wolseley-Lewis, Watson, Outterson Wood, D. Yellowlees, Mr. G. T. Hine, and Mr. A. H. Trevor.