

## RECENT MEDICO-LEGAL CASES.

REPORTED BY DR. MERCIER.

[The editors request that members will oblige by sending full newspaper reports of all cases of interest as published by the local press at the time of the assizes.]

*Reg. v. Peterson.*

## THE BIDDENDEN TRAGEDY.

Bertha Peterson, 45, daughter of the rector of Biddenden, was indicted for the murder of John Whibley. The deceased, a shoemaker, had been a teacher in the Sunday-school of Biddenden, and there had been rumours, eighteen months before the murder, of his having behaved indecently towards a little girl of eleven. The prisoner was much interested in the rumour, was a disciple of Mr. Stead, took a great interest in the Criminal Law Amendment Act, and appears to have allowed her attention to be absorbed in these subjects, until she became even more crazy than the general run of the nasty-minded apostles of purity. She purchased a revolver and practised with it. She wrote to the deceased expressing her regret for the mistaken attitude she had adopted towards him, and asking him to meet her in the parish schoolroom in the presence of witnesses and shake hands as a token of forgiveness. The meeting took place, and then, asking deceased to take a good look at a picture on the wall, she placed the revolver to the back of his head and shot him dead. Evidence was given of various eccentricities in the previous conduct of the prisoner, and Dr. Davies, Superintendent of the Kent County Asylum, and Dr. Hoare, surgeon to the Maidstone Gaol, in which the prisoner had been detained pending her trial, stated that in their opinion the prisoner was under the hallucination that she was ordered to shoot the man. At this point the judge interposed and invited the jury to stop the case. The jury preferred to hear the commencement of the speech for the defence, but before its conclusion they returned a verdict of guilty but insane.—Maidstone Assizes, July 12th, Mr. Justice Mathew.—*Times*, July 13th.

This case aroused considerable interest at the time of the murder. It is another instance of the exaggerated effect that any emotional propaganda may have upon persons of unstable brain. The unfortunate woman's mind was obsessed by the pseudo-revelations of Mr. Stead's pornography, and her crime was the result of her obsession. The ease with which the plea of insanity was established is rather remarkable in consideration of the elaborate premeditation and contrivance exhibited by the crime.

*Reg. v. Ansell.*

Mary Ann Ansell, 18, domestic servant, was indicted for the murder of her sister Caroline Ansell, a patient in Leavesden Asylum. The prisoner insured the life of the deceased for £22 10s. Early in the present year prisoner purchased several bottles of rat poison, saying that her mistress had sent her for it. On February 22nd deceased received by post a parcel containing tea and sugar, but when used they were found to have a bitter taste, and were thrown away. On February 24th deceased received a letter containing the false intelligence of the death of her father and mother, and purporting to be signed by a cousin, who, however, denied having sent it. On March 9th deceased received by post a jam sandwich, which she shared with two other inmates. All three were taken very ill, and Caroline Ansell died. The prisoner advised her father not to allow a *post-mortem* examination to be made, and, with his consent, wrote a letter in his name forbidding the examination. The prisoner's mistress denied having sent her for rat poison, or having used rat poison.

The plea of insanity was raised on the ground that although the prisoner had never been insane she had several relatives in asylums, and Dr. Forbes Winslow was the only medical man who could be found to say that the prisoner was irresponsible. The jury found the prisoner guilty. After the trial a considerable agitation was raised for the reprieve of the prisoner, and pressure was even