

III.—*Excerpta from Asylum Reports, 1863.*

(Continued from the July number of this Journal.)

*On Medical Certificates in cases of Homicidal Mania.*

“Several patients applied spontaneously for admission, of whom four had formerly been inmates. They sought the protection afforded by the asylum, from a sense of their returning malady and inability to take care of themselves.

“One of the applicants, who had not before been an inmate of any asylum, sought admission in order that he might be protected from a strong impulse to commit an act of homicide, accompanied with a fear that he might commit the alternative act, that of suicide, to save himself from the ignominy attending the former. He requested me to give him a certificate containing my opinion of his state. I found that at this time he was waited upon and watched by a person whom he had himself selected and engaged for the purpose. He added that he was not on good terms with his relatives, that they did not think he was insane, and he wished to act for himself in the matter. Several weeks afterwards I was sent for by this gentleman; his attendant had died after a short illness; he was in great distress, being now unprotected; feared he would shoot his landlady; confessed he had given arsenic to three persons for the purpose of killing them, and as it had failed, he had taken some himself, when, finding it inert, he had the remainder analysed, and it proved to be a harmless white powder—the chemist who supplied it, although labelling it “Arsenic—Poison,” having, he supposed, substituted bismuth, because he suspected he meant to make an improper use of the arsenic. I conducted him to the sheriff, to whom he repeated these statements, presenting, at the same time, a medical certificate of insanity, in order to obtain an order for his admission into an asylum under the recent Act, as a spontaneous applicant.

“Were we to judge from the frequency of tragical homicides which are recorded in the daily press, and the sympathy which is so often manifested in behalf of the accused parties, whether on the plea of insanity or otherwise, it is difficult to avoid the conviction that society at large is more afraid of having the liberty of the subject interfered with, than solicitous that human life should be preserved; and that medical men, instead of being too easily led to commit such individuals to proper care and treatment, are afraid to interfere for the protection of life and property, lest they should lay themselves open to vexatious legal proceedings hardly less vexatious to them,

both as regards time and money, even when they succeed in justifying their act, and gaining a verdict.

“The number of sensation novels and plays which have been issued of late years, in which the plot turns chiefly on the unjust confinement of some sane person on the pretext of insanity, seems greatly to have contributed to this state of things—a result strangely at variance with the facts established by the careful judicial investigations of the Commissioners in Lunacy for England, Ireland, and Scotland, from which it would appear that such a case is almost literally unknown; or if it has apparently occurred in a solitary instance, it has been followed by the immediate discharge of the alleged lunatic, thus demonstrating the safety with which the present statutes have guarded the liberty of the subject.

“Surely it would have been a hundredfold more desirable for the wretched homicide, whose mind has been weakened and perverted by vicious habits, for his unhappy family and the community at large, that he should have been timeously placed in an hospital for the cure of degraded and overpowering habits, and unaccountable delusions. Better, surely, that such treatment should be legalised as at once an act of mercy to the individual, and of social duty to the community, than that such a person should be allowed to walk about to the alarm of a whole neighbourhood, until, it may be, he has even sacrificed the life of a fellow-creature, incurred the last sentence of the law, caused a large expense to the country by his trial, and raised a thousand conflicting doubts as to the justice of his sentence—doubts which are never raised in connection with the administration of justice without injury to its authority, whether its decrees are enforced, or the doubts solved by a relaxation of its demands, the tendency of which is to diminish its power as a check upon crime.”—*Dr. Skae, ‘Annual Report of the Royal Edinburgh Asylum for the Insane for the year 1862.’*

*Results of Treatment in two thousand cases at the Somerset Asylum.*

“By comparing the results in quinquennial periods in these two thousand cases, it appears, that in the earliest period under twenty years, the males were more numerous than the females, and the mortality was greater by 13 per cent. amongst the males; the recoveries more (54 per cent.) among the females. In the next fifteen years, from 20 to 35 years, the females were more numerous and the recoveries were more, but the deaths continue to be more among the males. In the following six periods, from 35 to 70 years, the males were more numerous than the females, and the recoveries and the deaths were also more numerous than among the