

A Recent Trial for Murder. By FREDERICK NEEDHAM, M.D.,
M.R.C.P., Medical Superintendent of the York Lunatic
Hospital.

(*Regina v. Sleight. York Summer Assizes, 1871.*)

The circumstances of this case appear to me to be so interesting, in a psychological aspect, that I venture to place them at some length before the readers of the Journal.

Charles Sleight, aged 32, of good education, was charged with the wilful murder of Maria Hailstone, at Hull, on the 27th March last.

The prisoner pleaded not guilty.

The history of the prisoner and the circumstances of his crime were as follows:—

Brought up and educated by his brother, the master of a deaf and dumb institution in Brighton, he had displayed some ingenuity and much perseverance, together with a strong moral sense, and conscientiousness verging on the morbid. His mind would appear to have been characterised by neatness and the capacity for doing routine work efficiently, rather than by expansiveness, or any great amount of power. He remained as assistant in the Brighton school up to November, 1870, when he was appointed master of a similar institution in Hull. Of this, the deceased woman who was herself deaf and dumb, was housekeeper, and here she lived with her husband, also a deaf mute. These three persons were the only inhabitants of the house, and the prisoner had, therefore, no one at home with whom he could converse excepting by signs, whilst his opportunities of society beyond the institution were extremely limited.

His conduct towards his pupils and friends and his general character had always been most exemplary. He had endeared himself to those with whom he had been brought in contact, both at Brighton and in Hull, by his amiable temper, cheerful disposition, and satisfactory discharge of the duties which devolved upon him. Shortly after his appointment at Hull he complained in letters to his friends of the depressing effect produced upon him by the change from the cheerful society at Brighton to the dull monotony of his life in Hull, the sole breaks in this appearing to have been occasional visits to the adjoining country in company with a young person to whom

he was engaged to be married. Living in the same house with the deceased, and necessarily much in her society, he soon became greatly attached to her, and upon one occasion, at least, took her on his knee and kissed her; a fact which she communicated to her husband, not in the form of a complaint, but apparently as a matter to which she attached but little importance. The husband did not speak to the prisoner respecting it, nor did it seem to produce any strong impression upon his mind.

There can be no doubt that at and from this time the prisoner had strong sexual feelings towards the deceased, but there is the best reason to believe that he never had criminal intercourse with her.

Some time before the murder a change was noticed in the conduct, manner, and appearance of the prisoner. His cheerfulness gave place to despondency. He complained of sleeping badly, and of having shooting pains in his head. His manner became abrupt and peculiar, and a medical man whom he consulted expressed the fear that he was manifesting the symptoms of incipient mania. There was no suspicion of epilepsy either at this time or subsequently.

Two days prior to the murder the prisoner complained to the Secretary of the Deaf and Dumb Institution that he felt ill and unable to do his work. He also seemed anxious about the school, and generally depressed in spirits. He said he had been greatly tempted, but did not explain how, further than by the remark that he "had not committed fornication." A copy of "Clark's Commentary" was placed in his hands, and he was recommended to study it, and what was probably more to the purpose, to get married as speedily as possible. At this time he also complained to the doctor, and to the deceased and her husband, of pains in the head and sleeplessness. And in a letter to his sister he wrote that he felt his head spinning round, and feared his reason was giving way, adding the suggestive remark, "terrible fancies keep passing through my mind."

On the evening preceding the murder he was able as usual to give an address to his pupils. At half-past five o'clock the next morning the husband of the deceased woman got up and went out to his work in the town, leaving his wife in bed, and the prisoner in his own room on the floor below, and no other person in the house. At seven o'clock the prisoner, properly dressed, went to the police-station, and announced that a woman had been murdered at the Deaf and Dumb In-

stitution in Dock Street. When asked by whom she had been murdered, he held out his finger, which was slightly cut and wrapped round with a piece of linen, and stated that he had committed the fatal act.

Up to this time he had been perfectly calm and free from excitement; but he now suddenly became wild and excited, and attempted to seize, first the ruler from the desk, and then the poker which was lying within the fender. The inspector at once had him secured and placed in a cell, and then set off to Dock Street to ascertain the truth of the statement which had been made to him; first entering the prisoner's name in the charge sheet as that of a wandering lunatic.

On searching the house the body of the deceased was found laid upon the floor of her room, the head having been nearly severed from it, and the vertebræ notched with a razor, which was found on the spot. There was no evidence of any struggle, and a medical examination of the deceased showed conclusively that she had not been violated. There were bloody water and towels, and a blood-stained shirt in the prisoner's room. The outer door of the house was closed.

Such were the main facts deposed to at the preliminary inquiry in Hull, and subsequently sworn to at the trial in York, and I was requested to see the prisoner with a view to giving evidence in support of the plea of insanity. I saw and conversed with him for lengthened periods on the 29th and 30th of July, in company with his solicitor and Mr. Walsh, of the Lincoln Lunatic Hospital, with the result of satisfying myself of his insanity, both prior to and at the time of the murder, and also at the date of such examinations. The facts upon which I relied were briefly as follows:—

1. There was evidence of strong hereditary predisposition to insanity. An aunt on the father's side was confined in the Lincoln Hospital for many years, and manifested strong suicidal tendency. A cousin on the same side was also under care, and ultimately committed suicide. A cousin, on the mother's side, was confined as a lunatic. The prisoner's elder brother committed suicide by cutting his throat with a razor.

2. The change in the temper, disposition, and manner of the prisoner previously to the murder, deposed to by several witnesses.

3. The absence of sufficient motive for the crime. That started by the prosecution, viz.: that the prisoner had been attempting to take improper liberties with the deceased, and subsequently murdered her to prevent the exposure of his

misconduct, was not only unsupported by evidence, but was contrary to that which was sworn to. For there was no trace of any struggle, either in the room or upon the person of the deceased. Recent connection had not taken place, and the prisoner made no attempt to conceal the evidences of the more serious crime.

4. The voluntary confession of the prisoner, and the manner of it.

5. His condition and statements.—I found him to have a small head, feeble aspect, and restless, agitated manner. He continually rubbed his hands over his head, which he said felt as if an iron band were fastened tightly around it. He did not seem to realise his position in reference to the law, and he expressed no great concern for his crime, nor special pity for the object of it. His only trouble appeared to arise from the probable suffering of his brothers and sisters. His own possible execution, and the distress of his betrothed evidently gave him but little concern. He talked wildly and somewhat incoherently, but seemed pleased to discuss the various details of the murder, which he narrated to me in all their horrible minuteness without manifesting the smallest evidence of feeling, or giving any indication in manner or gesture that they related to matters in which he had been personally concerned.

He said, "I had been sleeping badly for weeks. The place was dreadfully monotonous, and I had no one to speak to excepting the Hailstones, who could only be communicated with by signs. I became very fond of Maria Hailstone, and frequently felt strong sexual feeling towards her, although I was engaged to be married. I knew it was very wicked, and I struggled against the temptation, and I never allowed it to overcome me; but I felt that it was weakening me both morally and physically. On the night before the murder I was unable to sleep, and was in and out of bed all night long. I saw numbers of little black spirits flying about my room, and heard them say quite distinctly, 'You are ruined; you have not enough money to marry on; kill yourself.' These spirits go about tempting everybody; but when people are strong and can sleep they are able to fight against and overcome them; when they are weak the spirits have the best of it. They went on telling me to kill myself until I could bear it no longer, but got up and went to my razors, intending to do so. But I felt afraid, and as if I had not courage. I then knelt down and prayed God to help me to resist, and

presently I felt better : but I could not sleep. At half-past five I heard Hailstone come downstairs, and go out to his work, and then the idea suddenly came into my mind that Maria Hailstone had ruined me, and I must kill her. I got out of bed and went into an adjoining room, and walked about, the suggestion constantly recurring to my mind, 'Slay her, slay her.' I then went back to my own room, and took a razor from my dressing table. It was the one which I had laid down after I had resisted the attempt to commit suicide. I went upstairs to Maria Hailstone's room. The door was closed, but I opened it and walked in. She was in bed asleep. I sat down upon the bed, put my arm round her neck, and kissed her. I was very fond of her, but I felt that I must murder her. After I had been there a few moments the front door bell rang, and I went downstairs to see what was wanted. I found it was the dust boy, and I told him to call later in the morning. I felt very much vexed with him for disturbing me before I had killed the girl. I then went back to her room, feeling that I must kill her. She was sitting on the bed putting on her stockings. I again sat down upon the bed, and placed my left arm around her neck, and cut her throat with all my strength. She gave a leap across the bed, and I threw the clothes on to her feet, and left the room, feeling greatly relieved in my mind. I then went back to my own room, and washed my hands, which were covered with blood. My shirt was also bloody, so I changed it. When I had done this I began to feel as if I had done something wrong, and I therefore dressed myself and went to the police office, and gave myself up. I know now that it was wrong to murder the deceased, because she had always been very kind to me ; but I felt that I had to do it, and I seemed unable to resist."

Such was the prisoner's statement, and it was in all points, where proof was possible, corroborated minutely by the evidence of the various witnesses.

Previously to the trial I told him that the plea of insanity was about to be urged in his behalf, and he said he thought he must have been mad to do such a thing. I then, as a test, suggested to him that for the purpose of such a defence it was of the utmost importance that he should be considered still as of unsound mind, because the jury would be reluctant to believe in his insanity at the time of the murder, and his recovery so soon afterwards.

I enforced this idea strongly upon him, and pointed out

that his life even might depend upon it; but I could not induce him to say, or permit me to say, that he was otherwise than perfectly sane and accountable at this time. Throughout the interview he seemed morbidly afraid lest he should be tempted by the fear of punishment to make any statement which was not strictly true.

At the trial, after the evidence for the prosecution and part of that for the defence had been heard, the jury stopped the trial, and returned a verdict of acquittal on the ground of insanity, the judge (Mellor) expressing his concurrence in the following decided words:—"I am not at all surprised at your verdict. I am quite satisfied that it is fully justified by the evidence. The conduct and character of the prisoner have been such that an act of this sort could hardly have been the result of anything but disease. The evidence was so satisfactory that I do not think it necessary to make further observations upon the case. I think the verdict must recommend itself to general approval."

The New Metropolitan Asylums.

In June, 1867, a new era was begun in the Poor Law system by Mr. Gathorne Hardy's Bill, which comprised arrangements for meeting the epidemic requirements of London, and for relieving the workhouses and lunatic asylums of the imbecile, idiotic, and chronic patients, not dangerous or destructive, but quiet in their habits, leaving behind merely the infirm poor and the acute and violent lunatics, for whom the accommodation was thought sufficient. There was also another clause providing a bevy of dispensaries, which however has not been carried out, though it was probably one of the most promising parts of the Bill. As regards the arrangements for epidemics, recent events have shown them to be inadequate; it must be said, however, that in 1867 the idea of meeting visitations of severe epidemics by temporary structures was not even in its infancy, otherwise we might have been spared such structures as Stockwell and Homerton Hospitals, which will never be filled or even half-filled in times of ordinary public health, and which are too small for great emergencies. A rapidly expansive system, as by temporary hospitals or by tents, capable of enlargement and of