MEDICAL MURDERERS

By Eugene Gorman, K.C.

A Meeting of the Medico-Legal Society of Victoria was held at the B.M.A. Hall, East Melbourne, on 23rd October, 1931. The President, Mr. Justice McArthur, presided, and introduced the speaker of this evening, Mr. Eugene Gorman, K.C., who would address members upon the subject of "Medical Murderers."

Mr. Gorman said:—

Omitting an exordium as an unnecessary encroachment on the time available for to-night's discussion, I propose to deal with a few well-known criminal cases in which the actors were of the medical profession, or used methods of interest to that profession. I abstain from discussion of recent crimes. My criminals are all dead, either by effluxion of time or by operation of law.

I have been greatly tempted to include among my characters Jean Paul Marat, for his wholesale homicidal tendencies, his unpleasant skin disease, and his dramatic exit at the hand of Charlotte Corday, make his career an arresting one. I understand, however, that the more conservative of the medical profession hesitate to claim him as a fellow-member. There seems to be some doubt whether his qualifications were such as would command recognition from the B.M.A., for it is said that his title of Doctor rested on nothing more substantial than a training in horse doctoring. Carlyle certainly referred to him as a "horse-leech."

Excluding him with some reluctance, I begin with a case well worthy of our examination, for the popular horror it aroused did much to remove the restrictions under which anatomists laboured, and brought about an amendment of the law by the enactment of the Anatomy Act 1832. That Act defined the law relating to the dissection of human cadavers, and indeed fixed it in the form in which it exists in England and Victoria to-day. The case, gentlemen, is that of:—

Burke, Hare and Dr. Knox

It may be objected that Dr. Knox was not convicted of murder or even charged, and that he should not be included in this review. To that I must answer that though his was not the hand which dealt the death blows, had it not been for his callousness, at least fifteen of the sixteen murders with which his name will ever be connected would probably not have taken place.

From 1505, when human dissection was carried out under great difficulties, the corporation of Edinburgh granted to the surgeons, who were also barbers, the corpse of one malefactor each year. That grant was conditional on the surgeon-barbers praying for the soul of the anatomical subject, and I have no doubt that medical ethics, though then in their infancy, required diligent fulfilment of this condition. The grant of one corpse was considered by the authorities quite adequate for the purposes of medical research, but, having regard to the abundance of subjects (due to the extreme fondness of that age for hanging) the allowance was, to say the least, niggardly. The surgeons and their pupils were resentful of the restriction and were desirous of supplementing their allowance. Some slight improvement in the supply resulted from special issues of anatomical material. Bodies of foundlings, persons without relatives, paupers and other criminals were from time to time provided for the anatomists, but the demand always greatly exceeded the legitimate supply, and throughout the eighteenth century there was a marked shortage of "official" bodies, which resulted in competition for any which might be obtained through unorthodox means. The chief workers were the doctor's apprentices. Sometimes they rifled churchyards at night, and at other times hired professional mourners to watch till the dying man, whose body was coveted, became a corpse. Then as chief relatives, they took control of the body. There were some very gruesome scenes. Competition became so keen that soon the students had their factions organized and fights between these factions were frequent. It was inevitable that much grief should be caused by these practices, and the agony of mind

of the wife who went back to visit her husband's grave and found the corpse gone needs no elaboration. The position became increasingly acute, as the students found they were not in a position to cope with the demands of the lecturers, and their methods became more and more audacious. Professional ghouls were installed in the lodging houses to note the deaths, follow the funerals and learn where the graves were. Sometimes at the graveside while simulating friendship with the mourners, the students engaged in the grossest brawls.

Public abhorrence of this state of affairs was such that in the eighteenth century surgeons were compelled to have a clause inserted in the indentures of their apprentices prohibiting the latter from rifling graveyards. From 1705 there had been an officially-recognized professor of anatomy in Edinburgh, and for a century and a quarter a dynasty of three Munroes ruled. They were a trio of Alexanders. Alexander I was highly thought of, so also was Alexander II. Alexander III inherited the mantle but not the brains of his predecessors, and pleased neither his confreres nor his rivals. His greatest rival was Dr. Robert Knox, concerning whose extraordinary ability there can be no question. He was a remarkably good anatomist, a very capable lecturer, and completely devoted to his profession. In that devotion, indeed, is to be found the explanation of what I have called his callousness. He was a most remarkable character, had served in the army, both at Waterloo and at the Cape, and in short was a personality in the medical world of Edinburgh. Knox kept a good table—of bodies. He had originally from three to four hundred students, and later five hundred, and it is said he spent £700 to £800 a year to secure bodies for his tables. He had some very able assistants, men who later achieved great reputations. But despite, or maybe because, of his attainments, Dr. Knox was not very popular socially. He was a very strong character, with a proper appreciation of his own ability and a great contempt for that of his colleagues. The following address to his students is informatory:—

"Before commencing to-day's lecture, I am compelled by

the sacred calls of duty to notice an extraordinary surgical operation which has this morning been performed in a neighbouring building by a gentleman (Liston) who, I believe, regards himself as the first surgeon in Europe. A country labourer from the neighbourhood of Tranent came to the infirmary a few days ago with an aneurism of considerable extent, connected with one of the large arteries of the neck; and notwithstanding of its being obvious to the merest tyro that it was an aneurism, the most distinguished surgeon in Europe, after an apparently searching examination, pronounced it to be an abscess. Accordingly, this professional celebrity, who among other things plumes himself upon the wonderful strength of his hands and arms, without pretension to head, and is an amateur member of the ring, plunged his knife into what he thus foolishly imagined to be an abscess; and the blood bursting forth from the deep gash in the aneurismal sac, the patient was dead in a few seconds. This notable member of the profession is actually an extra-academical lecturer on surgery in this great metropolis; and on this occasion was assisted by a gentleman similarly constituted both intellectually and physically, who had been trained under the fostering care of a learned professor in a certain University (Munro), who inherited his anatomical genius from his ancestors, and who has recently published a work on the anatomy of the human body, in which among other notabilities no notice is taken of the pericardium. Tracing the assistant of our distinguished operator further back, I have discovered that he had been originally apprenticed to a butcher of this City, but that he had been dismissed from this service for stealing a sheep's head and trotters from his employer's shambles. It is surely unnecessary for me to add that a knowledge of anatomy, physiology, pathology, and surgery is neither connected with nor dependent upon brute force, ignorance and presumption; nor has it anything to do with an utter destitution of honour and common honesty."

This discourse did little to increase his popularity.

When Dr. Knox was at the height of his career, there were in Edinburgh two scoundrels named Burke and Hare.

Associated with them were two ladies. Mr. Burke's lady friend was Helen MacDougall, and Hare's had made the concession to the conventions of describing herself as Mrs. Hare. The description had no legal warrant. This fine quartet were engaged in the keeping of a boarding house. Really I think that it was Mrs. Hare's boarding house, because she claimed a royalty of £1 on each body when the business commenced to flourish. An army pensioner named Donald died owing £4 to the proprietors. There was unanimity that this loss should not fall "on the house." Knowing of Knox's pride in his table, they sold the body to him for £7/10/-. Dazzled by their prospects of easy money they decided that keeping the boarding house was by comparison unremunerative, and immediately set out upon a truly amazing career of crime. It is given to few men to add a new word to the language, but Burke did, for the word "burk," or "burke," meaning to smother, came from this gentleman's method of slaying his victims. Hare and Burke made an oral agreement of partnership, which was in the main honourably observed, despite a temporary disagreement due to Burke's belief that Hare was engaging in private practice. Fortune not attending them when they were separated, they resumed their collaboration with such success that in nine months they murdered sixteen people. Knox got every one of the bodies. It is difficult to feel satisfied that the doctor was innocent of knowledge or suspicion of the methods employed. For corpses Dr. Knox gave £10 in winter and £8 in summer. The audacity of Burke and Hare was remarkable, for the bodies were frequently delivered to Dr. Knox's rooms while still quite warm. Burke was a single-minded man and alert provider. One remarkable instance was that of an old lady and her son who walked from Glasgow to find a relative. Burke, seeing them standing bewildered by the City, offered to render all assistance and led them to the lodging house. There he treated the old lady to liquor, immediately "burked" her, and carried her off to an assistant of Dr. Knox. A receipt was given as follows: "Received from Dr. Knox the sum of £10 for body." The child, aged ten years, was kept for a

few days, then killed by simply breaking his back across the knee and the body was delivered to the usual place, and sold for something less than the usual price.

Amongst their victims was a very beautiful girl, Mary Patterson, well known to many as a member of the frail sisterhood. She was of magnificent proportions, so beautifully built that artists went to Dr. Knox's rooms to admire the body before it was dissected. Nobody seems to have enquired how she died, although there was some little curiosity among those who had been her patrons. Still, no particular attention was given to the matter, and for the time being her murder passed off as satisfactorily as the others. One of the cruellest murders was that of a daft Scotch lad, a cripple. He was killed in the customary way and his body duly delivered to Dr. Knox. A student found the appearance of the body familiar, whereupon, it is alleged, Knox removed the head and feet from the body to prevent any chance of identification. The murder of one Mrs. Docherty brought the number up to sixteen in nine months. Then came the inevitable blunder, enquiries were made and Burke, Hare and their ladies were arrested. Mr. and Mrs. Hare had no love for Miss MacDougall, but she had the virtue of loyalty and was not the one who betrayed the partnership. Hare's love of his precious skin caused him to offer to turn King's evidence. Owing to certain difficulties of proof the prosecution decided to accept Hare in that capacity. There was a tremendous outcry at this decision. After a trial presenting no features of any great interest, except that although these people were of the labouring class, *seven counsel were briefed for the defence,* Burke was convicted, and the woman MacDougall acquitted. Then followed the erection of a gallows, and, amid great uproar, one of the largest crowds ever seen in Edinburgh assembled to take full stock of the execution. Burke was duly "turned off," as the phrase went. He met his fate with fortitude, and the matter that seemed to concern him most was that Dr. Knox owed him £10. He protested that he had fulfilled his part of the contract, having delivered the goods, and that Knox should honour his part of the deal.

Hare disappeared from Edinburgh, but Knox kept on with his lectures and demonstrations. He protested he was ignorant of the means whereby the bodies which came to him were procured. He thought, so he said, they were people who had died in cheap lodging houses, though they were delivered still warm. But the manner of death in each case was such that it is almost incredible that a man of his undoubted ability did not have more than a suspicion that the normal processes of nature had been expedited. His students stuck by him for a long time. Thinking it desirable to have some public pronouncement of his innocence he nominated his own committee of doctors to enquire into the matter. They found him blameless as he hoped and expected, but the public were not so easily satisfied, as appears from the popular lines, "Burke's the Butcher, Hare's the Thief And Knox the boy who buys the beef." He eventually lost his following and left Edinburgh. Munro had won, and the unkindest cut was that when Burke was hanged and his body publicly dissected, it was Munro who did the dissection. Dr. Knox tried to set up other schools but no luck attended him, and finally he went to London, where, it is said, he did obstetric work He died at the age of seventy-seven. The good that resulted from this ghastly business was the passing of the Anatomy Act in 1832. Public opinion was focussed upon the subject by the horror excited by the disclosures in Burke's trial. That Act is the basis of the law in force in Victoria at present. Mr. Burke has attained some degree of immortality, for I believe his body is preserved at the Edinburgh University.

Dr. Crippen

In 1910, this doctor, who had taken his degree in America, was married to a singularly unattractive lady who was not a success as wife or artist. She was ambitious for a stage career, but her pretensions as an actress failed to deceive the public. It was not surprising, therefore, that Crippen should be attracted to Ethel Le Neve, a pleasant enough girl from what one can gather. The marital difficulties of Crippen and his wife increased as time wore on, and, eventually, after a dinner to which some

friends had been invited, Mrs. Crippen was not seen alive again. Crippen explained that she had gone to America and died there. However, discretion was not his strong point, for he made no concealment of his association with Miss Le Neve. He gave her his wife's jewellery, and when she wore it publicly there was comment among certain neighbours, and ultimately the police were informed. They searched his home, without result, while he was away at his surgery. They then went to the surgery and obtained a statement from Crippen. His self control must have been remarkable, for he went on coolly with his work and answered their questions, during intervals from extracting teeth, sufficiently satisfactory almost to dispel suspicion. The police had little evidence to justify further investigation and the matter had practically been dropped when either Crippen or Le Neve lost his or her nerve, and they made the fatal decision to leave England. A detective who had gone back to make a further enquiry found that Crippen had gone. He poked around a cellar till he found two loose bricks, and digging down he discovered human remains. The head and some of the internal organs were missing, and it was difficult to determine the sex, but a piece of pyjama coat was found of which the prosecution were later able to prove the date of purchase. Crippen and his paramour had fled to Canada and for the first time the aid of wireless telegraphy was used in a murder case. The captain of the boat was notified and Crippen and Le Neve were arrested at Quebec. The two were brought back and Crippen stood his trial. It seems very probable that Crippen would not have been arrested if he had not fled. The trial excited great public interest and was noteworthy for the medical evidence for the Crown, and I find myself not entirely satisfied by that evidence. It is at least curious that no hyoscin was found by the analysts until the police learned that Crippen had, shortly prior to his wife's death, bought that poison. Similarly, a mark on a piece of flesh was not identified as a scar until it was learned that Mrs. Crippen had undergone an abdominal operation. It is recorded that when the piece of flesh was passed around the Court for

inspection, the only person unmoved was Crippen. He peered curiously at it and seemed quite interested. The guilt of the prisoner was established to the satisfaction of the jury and Crippen was convicted. Opinions still differ on the question whether his guilt for murder was satisfactorily established. Counsel for the Crown put to the jury the theory that the prisoner was enamoured of Le Neve and that his wife stood in the way of his illicit passion. The obvious motive for murdering his wife was his desire to be free to live with Le Neve. In view of the facts established, that theory is too simple to command acceptance. Marshall Hall believed that Crippen never intended to poison his wife, but that he knew hyoscin to be a sexual depressant and used it to lessen his wife's amorous propensities, which were occasioning him difficulty in view of the demands made by his association with Miss Le Neve. Hall's belief was that if this theory had been put before the jury, it would have secured his acquittal. This is to be said for Crippen, that all who were associated with him spoke well of him. He certainly had been very greatly provoked by Mrs. Crippen. Everyone regarded him as a pleasant little gentleman, and on reading his trial one is not without doubt about the justice of his conviction. He was quite popular in gaol and his sole desire right through was to protect Miss Le Neve, regardless of his personal fate. He was not an ornament of the medical profession, but was not without many redeeming features. Viewing his case professionally, it seems to me that he was unlucky to be convicted, particularly in view of the unsatisfactory medical evidence called for the Crown. I recommend the account of the trial in the Notable British Trial Series to your perusal. Miss Le Neve was subsequently tried for murder, but was acquitted. She was defended by the late Lord Birkenhead, then Mr. F. E. Smith.

Dr. Palmer

Disregarding chronological order I turn from Crippen to Palmer, whose misfortunes occurred in the years 1855-6. There can be no doubt that he had committed other murders than that for which he was executed. Palmer was a

doctor, but work was not to his taste and he freely associated with horsey people, to the great detriment of his professional dignity. His racing speculations proved unsuccessful and as a result he became entangled with moneylenders, and borrowed £13,000 from one on a note which purported to be endorsed by his mother. My professional experiences teach me that moneylenders are not nearly so trusting these days. His method of escape from his financial difficulties was to insure his wife for £13,000 and poison her. He regularly attended the sacrament, and made a careful note in his diary, "My poor dear Annie (his wife) expired at 10 past one." Shortly afterwards his maidservant gave birth to an illegitimate child of which he was the father. His criminal record is impressive. He poisoned his wife, his mother-in-law, two illegitimate children and a sporting gentleman named Bladon to whom he owed £800. His main claim to distinction, however, lies in the murder of one, Cook. Cook was originally ambitious of becoming a solicitor, but was lured away from that respectable profession by a fondness for racing. He inherited a substantial sum, but added nothing to it by his hobby, nor by his association with Palmer. His last valuable property was a mare called Polestar, on whom he staked heavily in a race which she won. Cook thereby became entitled to a substantial sum in winning wagers, but the mare's victory was responsible for his death. He had a weak chest and also a weak stomach; as Mr. Palmer discovered, a stomach quite unable to assimilate strychnine. Shortly after collecting his winnings he became very sick—violently bilious. Palmer was seen examining a glass to see what it contained, and there is good reason to believe that it was on that evening that Palmer had administered antimony or strychnine to Cook. Cook, during the next ten days became very ill, and for reasons which Palmer could have explained, his illness grew worse after partaking of a bowl of broth. A consultation was held between Palmer, an old doctor aged eighty-two and another doctor who accepted as correct the statements of the other two. The consultation was from Palmer's point of view quite success-

ful, and his two colleagues did not suspect that Cook's illness was due to any but natural causes. Palmer became both impatient and careless, however, and bought two lots of strychnine. In addition, he bought prussic acid and a little opium. He was certainly thorough! The prosecution was able to prove these purchases, and that proof went a long way towards convicting him. Some pills were administered to Cook, who, I need hardly mention, died some four hours later. Medical evidence called at the trial suggested that the pills could not have contained strychnine as no trace was found in the body. Palmer, for a man of some cleverness, was also a great fool. He arranged with the village postmaster to suppress certain letters. This got himself and the postmaster into trouble later on. He sent a present to the local coroner and got himself into more trouble quite apart from the mere murder. Cook had collected £800 as his winnings on Polestar's race, and Palmer's object was to get this amount. Local feeling ran very strongly against Palmer, and a special Act of Parliament was passed to enable him to be tried in London instead of Staffordshire. The case was felt to be of such difficulty and magnitude that three judges were assigned to it. It was one of the great English trials in many ways. Counsel included many men who later became Judges: Cockburn, Huddleston, Shee and Grove. Among them was Edward James, then one of the leading Q.C.'s, whose career and downfall make a story surpassing most fiction. Generally, the case was rich in celebrities. It was rich in medical experts, too. When the purchase of the strychnine was found, the Crown did not have much difficulty in calling doctors to prove that death was consistent with death by strychnine poisoning. This was the first case of any importance where the issue of strychnine poisoning was raised. The mainstay of the defence was that no strychnine had been found in the body, but the defence undertook the dangerous task of showing what was the cause of Cook's death. Numerous causes of death were suggested, ranging from tetanus to epilepsy. One or two of the expert witnesses for the defence might well have

been dropped in view of the richness of the alternatives which they offered to the jury. Possibly the true explanation is that Palmer used bruchsia, or some poison allied to strychnine and that the experts were not sufficiently advanced in their methods to trace all the differences in the strychnoid poisons. Palmer was duly convicted. He was greatly pleased at the speech of his own Counsel, but when the prosecution finished, he sent a note to his Counsel which read, "It was the riding that did it." Sir Alexander Cockburn, who prosecuted was extremely pleased at this tribute. Palmer did not view Lord Campbell, who was the presiding judge, with favour. He is said to have remarked, "I wish there were three grains for the judge's dose." The case, which lasted twelve days, is well worth studying, both from the legal and the medical point of view. The positiveness of the witnesses for the defence that Cook did not die from strychnine is somewhat supported by Palmer's ambiguous statement made just before his execution, "I am innocent of poisoning Cook by strychnine." However, the jury thought otherwise, and Palmer was hanged.

Adelaide Bartlett

I pass by Dr. Pritchard, whose career ended at Glasgow in 1865 and leave the medical profession for the moment to come to the case of Adelaide Bartlett, who was tried in 1886 and acquitted. She was charged with the murder of her husband, who was an elderly gentleman whose views on marriage were rather unusual. He considered that every man should have two wives, one of whom should be his soul mate, or spiritual companion. By a series of circumstances that need not be related, Mrs. Bartlett became friendly with a clergyman named Dyson. This friendship met with the approval of Mr. Bartlett, who told Dyson that when he, Bartlett, died, Dyson was to have his wife. Ultimately he did die, and the circumstances of his death led to his wife's trial for murder. The case is noteworthy for the craven behaviour of the Rev. Mr. Dyson, and the courageous bearing of the accused. The cause of the husband's death was poisoning by chloroform, but the Crown

case was lacking the two essentials—a satisfactory motive and an explanation of the manner in which the chloroform was administered. There was no evidence to show that Mrs. Bartlett wanted her husband out of the way, for he viewed her association with the clergyman with indulgent eyes, and the Crown found it impossible to suggest how the accused managed to get her husband to swallow chloroform. The sturdy commonsense of the jury baulked at hanging an attractive woman on evidence which left so much to conjecture, and she was acquitted. One cannot help feeling that, on the evidence, the verdict was a proper one, but at the same time one is tempted to echo Sir John Paget's wish that she had told just how she did it.

Dr. Lamson

Time does not permit me to do more than bring Dr. Lamson under your notice. The case is well worth study on account of the toxicological aspect. The remarkable feature of the murder for which Lamson was hanged was that the poison was administered to the victim, his nephew, in full view of the headmaster of the school at which the boy was boarding. The poison was administered in a cake, and was apparently inserted by some sleight of hand, for Lamson partook of a piece of the same cake. Lamson was convicted after a trial in which the judge, Sir Henry Hawkins, made clear his opinion of the prisoner's guilt.

He became penitent before execution and made a full confession.

Dr. Neil Cream

The medical qualifications of this gentleman are not free from doubt. His early life was laid in Canada and the United States of America, but in 1891 he came to England, after having been in grave difficulties with the law in America. His method of killing was by strychnine poisoning, but a consideration of his career shows him to be a subject for the psychiatrist rather than the lawyer. His murders in England numbered at least five women, and some of them seem motiveless. If there be such a thing as a homicidal maniac, Cream seems to have been one. He was

tried for the murder of a girl named Clover, but evidence that he had poisoned other women was admitted by Mr. Justice Hawkins. Whether the evidence should have been admitted is arguable, but once it was before the jury there was little doubt of the result. There was no Court of Criminal Appeal in those days, and the Judge refused to state a case for the opinion of the Court of Crown Cases Reserved, so the correctness of the decision to admit the evidence could not be challenged. Cream was hanged in 1892.

Dr. Webster and Dr. Harris

These two cases are American, and owing to the lateness of the hour I can but mention them. Dr. Webster deserved to be hanged for his stupidity, if for nothing else. He was Professor of Chemistry and Mineralogy at Harvard University in 1849, and his victim was a Dr. Parkman. The motive for the crime was a desire to check the insistence of Dr. Parkman upon the repayment of a loan he had made to Webster. Webster concluded that the best method of satisfying his creditor was to remove him to a world where the treasure hoarded is of a kind other than gold. The murder was a botched job, and Webster's endeavour to destroy the body in his laboratory furnace showed an ignorance deplorable in a professor of Chemistry. The case resembles a Victorian one in that the main evidence of the identity of the corpse was supplied by a dentist who identified a denture as one he had made for Dr. Parkman. Conviction followed quickly on arrest. As I have said, he was so stupid in his crime that it is difficult to feel anything but impatience with him.

Dr. Carlyle Harris poisoned a lady with whom he became entangled. The case is notable for the expert evidence, of which both prosecution and defence seemed to have an inexhaustible supply.

I have found it impossible to do more than direct your attention, somewhat sketchily, to the main features of the crimes I have mentioned to you, but if my brief and inadequate review of them has stimulated any interest in these matters, you will find the British trials reported in

full, and with much curious and pertinent information upon them, in an excellent series known as the Notable British Trials. These stories of real life excel in interest and dramatic intensity, the so-called detective "thrillers" which are to-day in such great demand.

I think the real moral to be drawn from a consideration of the matters I have discoursed upon to-night is one very favourable to the medical profession. Its opportunities to commit murder with comparative immunity are great, but very little advantage seems to have been taken of them, which suggests that the profession is singularly free from persons of homicidal tendencies.

DISCUSSION

Professor Wood Jones said he desired to express strong disagreement with Mr. Gorman's criticism of Dr. Knox. Dr. Knox was a man of outstanding ability, and there was no evidence upon which he could be suspected either of knowledge of or complicity in the Burke and Hare murders. When public opinion had forced him to abandon his life work of teaching, and he practised in London, he remained true to his scientific ideals. He was a very loyal servant of science.

After further discussion, a vote of thanks to Mr. Gorman was carried by acclamation.