WAS COOK KILLED BY STRYCHNIA?

[LETTER FROM DR. GLOVER.]

To the Editor of THE LANCET.

SIR,—I have hesitated for some time whether I should recur to the poisoning of Cook, having given, in an article in the *Express*, published with my name, a very positive opinion that strychnia was the poison. But an observation in a letter of Mr. Herapath, published in a Bristol paper, has induced me to publish an idea which has been growing in my mind. Mr. Herapath deprecates the obtruding of the subject of poisoning upon the public as likely to lead to disastrous results. I think the contrary: the safety of the poisoner is not in the knowledge, but in the ignorance, of the public. Poisoning was never so frequent as in those ages when the real nature, *modus operandi*, and detection of poisons was so little known. The gross ignorance of Donellan, who, when asked for what purpose a still was in his possession, said it was to make lime-water, did not prevent him getting hold of a copy of the "Philosophical Transactions," and there learning the art of making cherry-laurel water! The more general knowledge of the subject would lead to suspicion in cases where it does not now exist. However, there can be no impropriety in my communication to THE LANCET of the idea I have formed respecting the nature of the final instrument of death. Of course I put it hypothetically.

I proceed principally on what Palmer partially confessed, and what he refused to confess, and what he denied. His repeated statement that Cook was not killed by strychnia, his protesting against the fairness of the trial on the ground that "Lord Campbell summed up for strychnia," while, at the same time, when asked to deny that Cook was murdered by him, he remained silent; and finally, the sort of deprecatory admission to the chaplain, that, if asked to confess that murder, he must, on the same ground—the salvation of his soul—confess the others, hardly leave much doubt in my mind that his statement of the deed being not completed, at least by strychnia, is of value.

Such being the state of the case, then, let us see what other class of poisons, or what poison, would produce symptoms like those of Cook, similar as these are to those of strychnia.

Now, there is a whole class of such poisons; I mean, many of the compounds of cyanogen. The frightful tetanic spasms, the opisthotonos, the stiffening of the limbs, and clenching of the jaws, are all produced by some of them, as well as the screaming or shrieking out. But certainly there is one important difference—viz., the absence of consciousness during the paroxysms. But there are some remarkable exceptions to the ordinary rules in these and other poisons, so that we should be careful in deciding on a negative. For example, a remarkable instance occurred, some years ago, at Bristol, I think, the details of which I have not by me, but which amount to this—that a man swallowed a poisonous dose of prussic acid in a room, walked out coolly into the street, entered the druggist's where the poison had been bought, and said quite calmly, "I want some more of that prussic acid." Before the druggist could give it, he fell down, and almost immediately died. Now, some years back, this would have been denied. A few years ago, I was employed for the defence in a case of poisoning, in which the oil of bitter almonds had been used, and where a medical practitioner had, at the first inquest, given evidence that certain acts of volition could not be performed; but I showed him, before the adjourned inquest was held, that he was mistaken, and he retracted his statement, or an innocent man would have been sent to trial. Cases of this kind are of frequent occurrence.

The compounds of cyanogen the most likely to produce the symptoms of Cook, I conceive to be the cyanide of potassium and the cyanide of ammonium; the latter would require some chemical skill to prepare it, and we do not know whether Palmer had the necessary apparatus, or the requisite knowledge; the former is extensively used in the arts. A systematic poisoner is not unlikely to go out of the track—especially a medical man. It is true that the same tests which would detect prussic acid would detect these poisons, and that prussic acid was not found; but then neither was strychnia. He may have tried strychnia or other poisons. He had in his possession hydrocyanic acid and Battley's sedative solution, purchased on the morning of Cook's death, enough to cause the fatal result. Such very large doses of strychnia are not invariably fatal, for a case is recorded by Dr. Anderson, of Glasgow, in the *Monthly Journal of Medical Science*, where seven grains were taken in mistake, without a fatal result. (Seven grains!)

I believe, then, that Palmer, in protesting that he was unjustly condemned, because he did not kill Cook by *strychnia*, may have reasoned thus: "I am to be hanged for doing what I did not do, and am innocent." I throw out these ideas for what they are worth.

Your obedient servant,

R. M. GLOVER, M.D., F.R.S.E.,
Formerly Lecturer on Toxicology.

London, July, 1856.

THE NERVES OF THE UTERUS.

To the Editor of THE LANCET.

SIR,—In the last number of your journal, certain questions, founded upon false assertions, have been proposed to me. To mutilate the ganglia and nerves of the uterus by the removal of the neurilemma, and conceal the fact, could not be better characterized than as a *scientific fraud*. It is surely unnecessary for me to inform your readers that I have not been guilty of furtively destroying the structures which I had discovered, and to display which so much time and labour has been expended.

I am, Sir, your obedient servant,

Savile-row, July, 1856.

ROBERT LEE.

DR. ANDREW SMITH.

To the Editor of THE LANCET.

SIR,—My attention was yesterday called to a letter in the *Medical Circular* of the 2nd July, page 8, signed "Andrew Smith;" and as it is quite possible that part of the profession at least may believe I am its author, I feel it but justice to myself to distinctly declare that I neither wrote it, nor knew, till yesterday, anything of the circumstances to which it relates.

I am, Sir, your obedient servant,

ANDREW SMITH, M.D.,

Director-General, Army Medical Department.

Whitehall-yard, Westminster, July 4, 1856.

POOR-LAW SURGEONS.

MR. GRIFFIN'S MOVEMENT.

To the Editor of THE LANCET.

SIR,—The important speech of the Right Hon. Sir John Trollope, in the House of Commons, on the Poor-law medical question, is not mentioned in your last week's journal, I therefore imagine it has escaped your notice. He says: "I beg to call the attention of the right hon. gentleman, the President of the Poor-law Board, to the numerous petitions that have been presented on the subject of medical relief: nothing can be more unsatisfactory than the mode in which medical relief is now administered throughout the country. In many Unions I know that the mere medicines required would absorb the whole of the salaries given to medical officers, leaving them no remuneration, or any allowance for their necessary expenses. The amount asked by these petitions is not exorbitant, being only 5s. a case, and 1s. a mile for a single journey. Perhaps the medical gentlemen themselves are somewhat to blame for this state of things: under the operation of excessive competition they have been induced to take contracts at a lower scale than they could afford to do. It is notorious, that in the case of illness of paupers, private charity is compelled to supply the medical comforts which the Poor-law Unions do not provide. I wish this Bill had dealt with the question; and hope that in any future general Bill on the Poor Law the subject of medical relief will be included. As to any additional cost which a more liberal allowance would cause, I think I might refer the House to what is proposed to be done for the preservation of the health of the inhabitants of this metropolis alone; for whom it is asked that they should vote £3,000,000 for the purpose of draining and purifying. The whole amount expended for the medical relief of the poor throughout England and Wales, is £250,000 a year; if that sum were doubled, it would only make £500,000 to preserve the lives of the poor. Surely the people could not object to such an expenditure for such a purpose; on the contrary, I am quite sure the rate-payers would most cheerfully assent to it, as, when spread over the entire kingdom, its increase would scarcely be felt."

I need hardly point out to my professional brethren the necessity of strengthening the influence of Sir John Trollope's able speech by immediately sending in their petitions to the House of Commons, and memorials to the Poor-law Board. Officers connected with 350 Unions have voluntarily joined the association, but 170 only have written to me to say that they