

Bleyer (J. M.)



BEST METHOD

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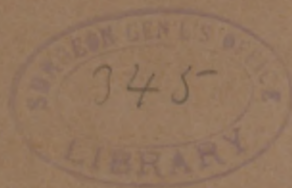
Executing Criminals,

— BY —

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*BEST METHOD OF EXECUTING CRIMINALS.*

BY J. MOUNT BLEYER, M.D., NEW YORK.

The subject of capital punishment, and of devising means for rendering the infliction of the death penalty less offensive to the humane sentiments of the age, is deservedly receiving a good deal of attention, and in one state, that of New York.

The present Governor has taken a deep interest in the subject and reverts to it in his message, as follows :

CAPITAL PUNISHMENT.

In my first annual message in 1885 it was stated as follows :

“The present mode of executing criminals by hanging has come down to us from the dark ages, and it may well be questioned whether the science of the present day cannot provide a means for taking the life of such as are condemned to die in a less barbarous manner. I commend this suggestion to the consideration of the Legislature.”

Nothing was accomplished, however, that year, but, public attention having been drawn to the subject, the Legislature, in 1886, appointed a commission to investi-



gate and report to the Legislature the most humane and practical method known to modern science of carrying into effect the sentence of death in capital cases. This commission has presented a full report, which will undoubtedly receive the prompt consideration which the importance of the subject deserves.

After the message of 1885 the subject began to interest me. When I received from the commission an invitation and notice to help in the investigation of this subject I had already followed up some experimental research, and was able to submit a report of my experience in the matter.

#### I. GENERAL REVIEW OF THE SUBJECT.

The taking of human life by process of law has ever been regarded as a necessary exercise of the right of self-defense naturally vested in society, and an indispensable means of providing for the security and well-being of all its members: nevertheless, there has arisen in recent times a strong feeling of opposition to the theory and practice of legal retaliation, as far as the death penalty is concerned, and in particular against the bungling and barbarous method of capital execution in use from time immemorial in England, and thence derived to America death by strangulation, or by hanging. Moved by such considerations as these, some of the States of the American Union, as well as one at least of the governments of Europe—Switzerland—some years ago enacted

laws abolishing the death penalty, but I believe that all, or nearly all of these States have since repealed such legislation, on the ground that, in the absence of the supreme penalty, the class of crimes known as "capital" was found to increase in a marked degree. But our present concern is not with the question of the retention or the abolition of the death penalty in general : we have to do only with the problem of devising a substitute for the gallows as a means of carrying out capital executions. Nor do we intend to consider any of the methods of capital execution in vogue in countries where the rope is not employed—as the guillotine, the garrote, shooting to death, etc.—but only to propose other methods, suggested by the advance of physical and chemical science, in modern times. For the rest, judging from the frequency of murderous crimes shown by criminal statistics from year to year, and by the records of the newspaper press, we find little reason to infer that the number of human beings to be done to death according to law will be in any notable degree diminished in the near future.

## II. DEATH BY HANGING.

In view of this condition of affairs, it behoves the medical profession, which, more than any other class, has knowledge of the processes of living and of dying, to consider the means adopted by the legal authorities for taking lives which have been forfeited to the State ; to decide whether or not these methods are humane, and to advise the law-makers concerning improvements, if

any are necessary and possible. I write in the full conviction that the present usage is antiquated and barbarous, and that a substitute for it can readily be found which shall be free from objectionable features.

It is not my purpose to attempt an historical account of execution by hanging. Suffice it to say that it has long been the favorite method of putting criminals to death in the English speaking countries, and was doubtless adopted on account of its supposed superiority to others in point of humanity. That death by hanging is sometimes sudden, painless, and as free from hideous display as such a process well can be, is freely admitted; but that it is often slow, painful, and altogether horrible is known to all men. Occasionally the rope breaks, and the victim falls to the ground, only to be picked up and dragged again to the scaffold, to experience once more the bitterness of death. Once in a while the long drop effects decapitation, and we have the bloodiness of the guillotine, without its grim decorousness.

Last winter in England a condemned man was on the scaffold: the last word had been spoken, the bolt was drawn, but the drop did not fall. The convict was removed, the apparatus was tested, and again the intended victim was put in position. A second and a third time did the drop fail to act when released, and then the poor fellow, who had thrice looked death calmly in the face, fainted and was carried back to his cell. His sentence was commuted, and the people said Amen. So frequent are the bunglings and failures, that those who have the

business in charge are always nervous till the affair is over. Said the assistant-warden, in response to a congratulation on the success of the recent hanging at Thomaston : " Yes, it passed off well ; but we have been very anxious about it for three weeks. The last one we had here was not so successful ! " Indeed it was not, as any one who witnessed it can testify. I have no hesitancy in pronouncing so imperfect and cruel a method of taking human life entirely unworthy of the civilization of the nineteenth century.

### III. DEATH BY ELECTRICITY.

Last April, in the Legislature of Pennsylvania, a bill was introduced providing that the penalty for the crime of murder in the first degree should be death by electricity.

This method of taking human life certainly possesses all the requisites of a fitting mode of capital execution. It is decorous, involving no brutal or barbarous intervention of the executioner ; it is humane, involving no prolonged agony for the condemned. The duration of an electric spark amounts only to an extremely small fraction of a second of time—about one five-hundredth part. The nervous system requires no appreciable length of time to act or to react. A puncture made with a pin on the arm is not *instantly* noted by the brain, or felt, as we say ; a man may lose a finger or a hand by the action of a rapidly revolving circular saw, and feel no pain at the instant. In death by the electric current life is un-



EXECUTION BY ELECTRICITY.



doubtedly extinct before the afferent nerves can carry to the brain intelligence of the stroke that has fallen. It follows that death by such means—death by electricity—must be absolutely painless.

The mode of execution by electricity would be about as follows :

Electric wires connecting with the main wires which supply light through the city's streets, might be laid to the place assigned for executions, being so concealed and guarded as to be inaccessible to the condemned criminal or his friends, and otherwise protected against accident. At the assigned place a small wooden house, like a sentry-box or a watchman's hut should be erected. Spring locks, which close around both limbs, neck and arms, should be so attached to this hut that it will take but a few seconds to enclose the criminal in order that the body will not fall to the ground after death. A metallic plate connecting with one of the wires and serving as an electrode is placed even with the floor of the hut ; on this plate the criminal is to stand. A second electrode is introduced through the roof of the hut, and its end descends just so far within the hut as just to touch the top of the head when the criminal is introduced into the box. His feet should be bare, and his hair cropped short. When the time for the execution has come, the electrodes are to be tested to determine whether the current flows in sufficient force, and the whole apparatus is in proper

working order. If so, the sheriff, or his deputy, or other representative of the law, touches a push-button, thus closing the circuit. The electric current passes through the body of the criminal, and even before the bystanders have consciousness of the act of pressing the button all is over.

Post-mortem examinations show the blood coagulated throughout all its vessels. Experiments made by me upon the lower animals prove that after death by electricity decomposition proceeds with extreme rapidity. Perhaps this circumstance is to be regarded as an incidental advantage of this mode of execution: it would tend to abridge, if not to abolish, the customary "wake" over the criminal's carcass.

This plan was tried on a large dog. The animal never made a perceptible movement or uttered a sound. Rabbits were experimented upon in the same manner. In every instance death was instantaneous and presumably painless.

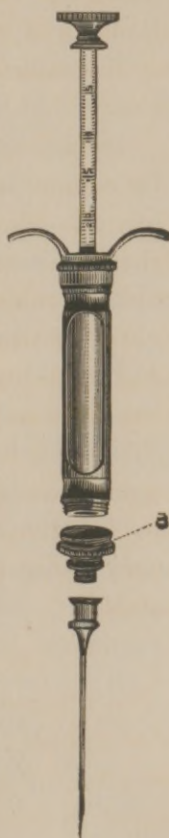
#### IV. DEATH BY MORPHINE INJECTION.

Equally painless is death by the hypodermic injection of morphine; and in other respects this method of destroying life seems to be eminently suitable to be employed in capital executions.

Hypodermic, or Subcutaneous Injection is a simple method of introducing into the circulation certain drugs, especially anodynes; it is frequently resorted to by sur-

geons in cases where a more prompt and decided effect is desired than could be obtained by introducing the same medicinal agents through the mouth.

It was Professor Rudolph Virchow, of Berlin, who first absolutely demonstrated the incapacity of the human stomach to absorb the heroic doses of medicine prescribed by the physicians of the olden time. At present the microscopic chemist knows that certain medicines are never thoroughly absorbed by the human stomach, the ultimate molecules of these agents being too large to enter the minute absorbent vessels distributed over the stomach walls. Accordingly the preparation of medicines has undergone a vast change in our day, and now in most cases only their active principles are used. They are so perfectly manufactured that they readily pass from the stomach into the current of the blood circulation, or they are introduced under the skin by the hypodermic syringe. This instrument is a small syringe holding about thirty drops of liquid, and having for its nozzle a hollow needle. In giving an injection, the operator seizes between the thumb and the first two fingers of his left hand the skin, usually of the subject's arm, and holding the charged syringe firmly in his right,



quickly thrusts the needle-point into the superficial underskin, at the same time forcing the liquid into the puncture. The needle is then withdrawn, and the operation is at an end.

The details of a capital execution by morphine injection would be about as follows :\*

At the appointed time, the sheriff, accompanied by two deputies and the citizens prescribed by statute, enters the cell of the convict, who is lying on a couch. The sheriff administers six grains of sulphate of morphine under the skin of the felon, who, in a few moments begins to be drowsy. Soon he is overpowered with sleep, and the officer, to make assurance doubly secure, repeats the dose. Within half an hour the heart has ceased to beat, and the man is dead, having passed away without pain, convulsion, struggle, or consciousness.

The advantages of this method are its certainty, its painlessness, the freedom from the chance of horrible displays, the reduction of the dramatic element to a minimum, and its inexpensiveness.

(1.) No one will dispute the certainty of the result. If anybody fears that the dose is too small, it can be repeated over and over again, so that the end may be greatly hastened. There is no possibility of the rejection of the poison.

(2.) No suffering is caused to the condemned man, for

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\* The engraving shows the method of administering morphine by hypodermic injection.



CAPITAL EXECUTION BY MORPHINE INJECTION.

the slight sting of the hypodermic injection is unworthy to be called pain.

(3.) There are no convulsions, no decapitation, none of the hideous phenomena that often attend a hanging ; the man simply goes to sleep, never to awake.

(4.) Many of the criminals who are condemned to death, finding that a change of punishment is impossible, make the most of their situation, and try to glorify themselves in the eyes of their friends by "dying game" on the gallows, and carrying themselves jauntily on the threshold of eternity. The exclusion of the public from executions has greatly diminished the opportunities for spectacular display ; but the quiet and seclusion of the cell in which the fatal dose of morphine is taken reduces these chances to their very lowest terms. A villain on the scaffold, in full possession of his faculties, anticipating instant extinction, may appear heroic ; the same man submitting to the trivial puncture of a hypodermic, and presently becoming too stupid to keep his eyes open, is far less likely to consider himself, or be thought by others, a hero.

(5.) The cost of erecting the gallows is considerable ; that of a hypodermic syringe and morphine insignificant. It may be a small matter to discuss ; but, after the State has been at the expense which a murder trial usually costs, generally paying the fees of the defendant's counsel, as well as those of the prosecution, it is not improper to desire that the last act of the tragedy may be as inexpensive as possible.

Various objections are made to the proposed change, and these will be considered and answered *seriatim*.

(a) It is said that the sheriff cannot inject the morphine skillfully. If one but recalls the ease with which he himself learned how to use the hypodermic syringe, and the number of people in his acquaintance who acquired all too readily the necessary skill for administering doses to themselves, he will see the weakness of this objection.

(b) The slowness of the dying is thought to be undesirable. But in this, as in other affairs, the thing is quickly enough done, when it is well enough done. At the worst, the time will not be very long, and every minute will show that the man is sinking into a rapidly deepening sleep.

(c) It is suggested that convicts might be opium-eaters, or might train themselves so that their nervous systems would be incapable of receiving a fatal impression from morphine. To say nothing of the supposition that any person might not be poisoned to death by morphine, it is to be observed that the law requires that a considerable interval of time shall intervene between sentence and execution, and surely the State does not supply its prisoners with drugs to be taken for merely intoxicant effects. At all events the opium-habit would be cured, or its slave be dead—an arrangement to which nobody would object.

## V. DEATH BY CHLOROFORM.

The anæsthetic which has hitherto been most largely used in medical and surgical practice is chloroform, and this agent may cause death when introduced into the system by inhalation.

The symptoms produced by the inhalation of chloroform vapor may be divided into three groups of varying intensity. Briefly they are as follows :

*First*, a degree of relief from pain (if the subject has been suffering pain) with slight stimulation, the senses being but slightly affected.

*Secondly*, a stage of excitation and incoherence, wherein the subject is prone to struggle.

*Thirdly*, a stage whereof the most marked features are complete insensibility and narcotism, with relaxation of the muscular system. At first there is consciousness of all that is passing about the patient or subject ; there is, however, dizziness and ringing in the ears. Then the mental faculties are impaired ; there is often excitement ; the saliva is increased ; the inhaler is pushed away ; rigidity and spasms of the muscles may occur, and there is incoherent talk.

In the next stage there is insensibility to pain, and the eye-ball may be touched without causing flinching. If the use of the anæsthetic be pushed further the breathing becomes stentorian, the muscles quite relaxed, and the pupils dilated, while a still further increase of the chloroform embarrasses and then stops the respiration, and arrests the heart's action.



Many cases of death from the vapor of chloroform have occurred, the fatal result sometimes happening very rapidly, from shock, syncope, or convulsions ; in others again by way of asphyxia. The vapor of only 30 drops of chloroform has destroyed life in one minute.

Should chloroform be employed for inflicting the legal death penalty, the selection of the apparatus would depend upon circumstances, and on the judgment and the experience of the administrator of the drug. Whilst elaborately contrived inhalers are used in hospitals, none of these would be required in capital executions, the purpose of their contrivers being to render the administration of the drug as safe as possible. It suffices to bind over the mouth and nostrils of the subject a cloth saturated with a sufficient quantity of the chloroform. The subject should be placed in a reclining posture. As insensibility is more rapidly produced by this agent when the stomach is empty, no solid food should be given for at least six hours before the administration of the drug.

#### VI. DEATH BY PRUSSIC ACID.

Hydrocyanic, or Prussic Acid, on account of its energetic and rapid action, is one of the most formidable poisons known.

On being introduced into the system it rapidly enters the tissues, and acts chiefly on the nervous structures. Taken in a considerable dose it causes giddiness, faintness and nausea, a feeling of constriction in the chest, headache, mental confusion, disordered breathing, slow

ing of the pulse and muscular debility. Larger doses aggravate these symptoms, and produce grave dyspnoea and other signs of asphyxia. Taken in still greater quantity it produces death swiftly. Analysis proves that this agent, while depressing all the nerve tissues, acts first and chiefly upon the respiratory centres, which are momentarily excited and then depressed: there is weak respiration with long pauses, dyspnoea, convulsions and finally death by asphyxia.

#### VII. OBJECTIONS CONSIDERED.

1. It is objected that the publicity of an execution is diminished by the projected methods, and the chance to impress the people is lost. The present law allows but few to attend an execution, evidently with the design of avoiding publicity, for the effect on the community of an old-fashioned hanging was believed to be extremely harmful. A sufficient impression is made on the populace by the announcement of the fulfillment of the law; the chief purpose of which is the permanent removal of a worse than worthless member of society.

2. Some have said that they do not object to having felons endure some physical pain. Obviously the people do not entertain such views; for they have abolished torture and those forms of execution which are always painful, like crucifixion; and I believe they have retained hanging so long only because no plainly better plan has been advocated. The effort always is to make

the death by hanging as sudden and painless as possible ; and, when it is not so, we blame the executioner.

3. It is objected that criminals dread death by hanging more than they would that by electricity, morphine, etc., and thus are deterred from committing deeds which they would venture upon, if an easy poison or the electric current were substituted for the rope. This seems to me in the highest degree improbable ; but the discussion of the point would inevitably lead to the re-opening of the question of the value of capital punishment, a subject which it would be improper to introduce here. It is well, however, to remember that the deprivation of opportunity for a dramatic exhibition would be so serious a matter to a convict that it would be almost like adding a sting to death.





