

# The Medical Fortnightly

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\$2.00 PER YEAR : SAINT LOUIS, U. S. A., MAY 15, 1892. : VOL. I, No. 10

## Original Department.

PAPERS for this department should be in hand one month in advance, and must be contributed to THE MEDICAL FORTNIGHTLY exclusively. A liberal number of extra copies will be furnished authors, and reprints may be obtained at reasonable rates, if request accompanies the manuscript. Engravings from photographs furnished free. Signature of contributor, for reproduction, should be sent with every article, on a separate slip; use heavy ink, and allow autograph to dry, without applying blotter.

### The Mitchell-Ward Case.\*

BY DR. A. B. HOLDER,

MEMPHIS, TENN.

WRITTEN FOR THE MEDICAL FORTNIGHTLY.

AT four o'clock in the afternoon, January 25th, a young woman was brought to our office in an express wagon with her throat cut, and, having bled past assistance, in a few minutes was dead. Such a sight is shocking, but by no means unusual. Yet unique in the history of crime, became the event; in the light of the facts as they were related by the sister of the victim, brought in a few minutes later for treatment of a less severe injury at the same hand, and by other witnesses at the trial of Miss Mitchell's companion.

The facts were about these: A nineteen-year old girl of excellent family, excellent associations, the best school, church and social advantages, on a bright afternoon, on a public street, awaits and follows another girl of excellent name and social standing, and, seizing her from behind, cuts at her throat with a razor; on being interrupted, she slashes at the girl's sister interrupting her, causing a slight neck wound; again seizes her victim, now

\*[At the request of my friend, THE FORTNIGHTLY'S editor, I submit such facts as are known, having a medical or medico-legal bearing in the above celebrated case. If additional important facts are developed in the trial, they, with a collection of similar cases, will form the material of a later paper.]

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down, and repeats the cuts with the razor till there are four gashes on the face and two on the throat, causing rapid death; then she returns to her home in the buggy in which she came.

The girl had secured the razor from her father's case some hours before for this use, had driven in her buggy with a young lady friend, several times past the house where her victim visited, knowing that this was her evening of departure from the city; had awaited her coming forth, and, driving slowly, had followed her eight or nine blocks, had then passed and gotten out upon the sidewalk, stood while the victim went by and directly made the attack as related.

The two girls and their families had been friends for years. Alice Mitchell had visited Freda Ward and her sister at their home above Memphis, and Freda Ward and her sister had usually visited at the Mitchell home when in Memphis.

A few months ago the intimacy between Alice and Freda had been broken at the instance of Freda's eldest sister, who stood in loco parentis. For reasons which she thought sufficient to justify so severe a course, this sister had instructed Freda to return to Miss Mitchell all tokens received from her, not to write again to her, not to visit her while in Memphis; nor even to recognize her on the street, lest further association should follow.

These instructions the unfortunate girl obeyed, with one exception to be related later, even passing Miss Mitchell without recognition a few minutes before the tragedy.

It is this intimacy and its fatal ending that stirs the interest of the medical profession.

It was not such as usually exists between school-girls.

One of the reasons assigned by Mrs. Volkmar for ending it was that the intimacy was "abnormal."

Alice Mitchell frequently spoke of and to Freda Ward in peculiar, endearing terms, asserting that she could not live without her. As Freda passed a few minutes before the killing, Miss Mitchell said to her companion, Miss Johnson, "Fred Ward winked at me. I am going down to the corner to have one more look at her, and tell her good-by;" and when she hurried back from the bloody work, she cried, "I have cut Fred's throat. I do not know whether I killed her or not, but I loved her so I couldn't help it," and when her friend called her attention to the blood on her face, she said, "Don't wipe it off, it is Fred's blood, and you know how I loved her."

In letters and conversation, Miss Mitchell constantly referred to Miss Freda as her *sweetheart* or *wife*. One of the tokens returned by Miss Ward was a ring frequently referred to as an *engagement ring*.

By the testimony of the sister, Jo Ward, in the trial of Miss Johnson, Freda, in August, packed a valise and dressed to come to Memphis to marry *Alice Mitchell*, and go to St. Louis; Alice Mitchell was to be the *man*, Freda to be the *wife*; Alice Mitchell to be called Alvin G. Ward, Freda to be called Mrs. Alvin G. Ward. Their plan was discovered and thwarted by intercepting their correspondence.

The attitude of Freda Ward as to that affair and her feeling toward Miss Mitchell after the interference of the family may be inferred from a note

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from Freda to Alice written a week before the tragedy. From this note, taken with Miss Mitchell's words just before and just after the killing, may also be fairly inferred Miss Mitchell's feelings toward Miss Ward about the time of that event. The writing of this note was the one disobedience by Miss Freda to her sister's instruction of non-intercourse. In the letter she says: "I love you now and always will, but I have been forbidden to speak to you, and I have to obey; you say I am as much to blame as you are. If I have done you any harm, or caused you any trouble, I humbly beg your pardon. No one knows about that last summer's business but our family; that is unless you told some one. We go back to Gold Dust this evening. FRED."

The return was postponed, and again set for the 25th. There is a newspaper statement, apparently well founded, that on a visit to Cincinnati Miss Mitchell "in various ways made (masculine) love" to a young lady there. She would hug and kiss the girl and say, "wouldn't you prefer me to a man for a husband?"

On the facts as stated above is based a popular theory of sexual perversion. The only lips that could with certainty confirm this theory are closed—Miss Ward's in death, Miss Mitchell's by the counsel of her attorneys. No statement bearing on this has yet been uttered by Miss Mitchell or her family. No examination of Miss Mitchell has been allowed.

It is somewhat amusing, the naiveté with which, in letters, medical men from abroad have asked has Miss Mitchell this or that sexual malformation, forgetting that Miss Mitchell, though now a prisoner, is of a refined, wealthy family, and that no trial of Miss Mitchell, even preliminary, has yet taken place.

The sexual passion is among the most powerful that sway human actions. Restrained, it gives a charm to life that perhaps the angels lack; unchecked and perverted, it makes a hell that Satan would envy. Sexual perversion is so unclean a subject that the right-minded man would turn from it, were it not that, for its treatment, and better, for its prevention, it behooves him to stir its unclean depths.

Sexual perversions are sadly common, but fortunately it is chiefly in the male that they are found, well-known forms being masturbation, pederasty, and that form still more despicable, practiced by the Boté, whom I described in the New York Medical Journal of December 7, 1889. But to the sexual infatuation of one woman for another, our attention has been but little drawn—I trust from its rareness. Yet that there is such an infatuation, there are abundant examples; intimacies in which the women, one active, the other passive, succeed by some methods in exciting the sexual orgasm in one another. By some such perversion might be explained the fearful infatuation of such a case as Miss Mitchell's. Whether or not such a perversion does exist, its relation to insanity as cause or effect, and the relation of both to the fearful tragedy, are matters upon which light may be thrown in the trial; which trial, for the public good, it might be devoutly wished could take place without such publicity of details as shall gratify the prurient curiosity of men and women.

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Meanwhile, it may be remembered—

1. That an infatuation leading to homicide is not of necessity sexual. As, observe the infatuation which leads the insane mother to murder her own children under some delusion.

2. That sexual perversion does not of necessity require sexual malformation; as in pederasty, where both parties are often perfectly-formed males, or in the case of the Boté, who is without physical sexual defect. "It seems certain that a feminine functionating brain can occupy a male body and vice versa." (Kiernan.)

3. That sexual perversion may be a cause of insanity, such insanity being often "the ultimate wreck of a life ill-guided, directed chiefly by caprice and passion and weakened by indulgence." (Folsom.)

4. That sexual perversion may be a result and evidence rather than a cause of insanity, and then merits our deepest consideration and pity. (Hammond.)

5. That sexual perversion alone does not of necessity establish insanity. (Spitzka, Krafft-Ebing, Tarnowsky, Kiernan.)

6. That if a mind be insane on this point it is not, as a rule, insane on this point only. In a monomaniac, usually all the mental faculties are more or less affected, but the affection is more strikingly manifested in some of these than in others. (Lord Lydhurst Prichard, Taylor.)



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