

### A HUNDRED YEARS AGO

#### **The Importance of Inquiring into the Mental Condition of Criminals**

In June, 1894, Dr. H. Monod ("Annales Médico-Psychologiques," No. 2, 1895) requested the superintendents of public asylums in France to forward him the notes of cases (among their patients) in which a verdict of guilty had been pronounced in the law courts for a crime *unmistakably caused by their mental disease*, and committed at some time preceding their admission to the lunatic asylum. A collection of 271 cases, extending over five years, was thus made – cases in which a medico-legal inquiry would have prevented undeserved punishment and disgrace. For obvious reasons (only asylum superintendents were consulted; several gave no replies; only those criminals subsequently declared *pauper lunatics* were scheduled, etc.) this only expresses a percentage of the "convict lunatics" condemned in the five years (1886, 1887, 1888, 1889, 1890), and 700 would be a fair estimate of these *preventable convictions*, i.e., 140 per annum.

This is a serious evil, and a remedy should be found. Dr. Monod suggests that magistrates should possess knowledge sufficient to decide in suitable cases upon calling in a medical expert, or there should be in some way a strengthening of the bonds which unite medicine with the law. The question requires study. We note that among the 271 cases, 223 were men; 96 were between 30 and 40 years of age; 94 were condemned for theft. In their order of frequency we find that 65 were cases of dementia or mental enfeeblement, 58 general paralytics, 21 either epileptic or hysterical patients, etc.

Notes of some of the most interesting cases are given at the end of Dr. Monod's article. We cannot but fervently pray for reform when we read of a general paralytic being condemned to six months' imprisonment for injuring a tree.

#### **Reference**

*Journal of Mental Science*, January 1896, 192.

*Researched by Henry Rollin, Emeritus Consultant Psychiatrist, Horton Hospital, Epsom, Surrey*