A HUNDRED YEARS AGO

Malice or madness?

What is justly described as a "shocking scene in a prison" has just occurred at Dartmoor. An exceptionally "bad" young man, who was sentenced to seven years' penal servitude in August, 1879, he having been no less than nine times previously convicted and once flogged, was being examined in prison on Tuesday last on a charge of a violent assault on a warder, whom it seems he nearly killed with a spade, when his violence was such that with great difficulty several warders put him in irons. The story is sickening in its brutality. What, however, must most powerfully strike the medical reader is that the narrative very closely resembles one of the old stories of a struggle with a madman in the days before the humane system of non-restraint was introduced into the asylums of this country. The question we are actuated to ask – and it is one which ought to be pressed strongly on the consideration of the Home Office – is whether this young man is not mad? He was convicted nine times before he reached the age of eighteen. Moreover, his rage is manifestly that of mania, rather than a sane being. We are not in the habit of interfering in cases of alleged lunacy, but we really think this is an instance in which Sir William Harcourt should interfere, either at once or at the trial. Looking to the treatment – wholly unworthy of a civilised country – which Thomas Jones is undergoing in the dark cell at Dartmoor, it would be well if the inquiry necessary to reassure the public mind that a madman is not being punished when he ought to be placed under treatment could be instituted at once. However desirable it may be to keep insubordinate convicts in check by terror, it cannot be permitted that prison authorities should reproduce the horrors of the Spanish inquisition in one of Queen Victoria's gaols, and withal mistake a lunatic for a felon.

Reference

Lancet, 14 April 1883, 648–649.

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