

## **The alleged employment of chloroform by thieves ... / [John Snow].**

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# THE ALLEGED EMPLOYMENT OF CHLOROFORM BY THIEVES.

BY

JOHN SNOW, M.D.

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From the London Medical Gazette, February 22, 1850.

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IN two recent cases of robbery it has been asserted that chloroform was used to render the victims insensible; and although no real evidence has appeared of such having been the fact, yet the statement has gained great publicity through the newspapers, and the sentences on the prisoners have apparently been rendered more severe by the allegation.

It can readily be shown that if thieves and prostitutes were to resort to the use of chloroform in the public streets, in the manner alleged, the attempt would only lead to their instant detection on the spot. The sensation of pungency in the nostrils and throat that is caused by this agent, when its vapour is in sufficient quantity to produce any effect on the sensorium, is so strong and peculiar that no person can take a single inspiration without being aware that he is inhaling something very unusual. Chloroform, in fact, can never be administered without the consent of the party taking it, unless by main force, which has to be used in the case of children who are not old enough to be reasoned into taking it. If a child be asleep when the process of inhalation is commenced, it nearly always awakes before being made insensible, however gently the vapour may be insinuated. As breathing is perfectly under the control of the will, a person would, on finding such a strange attempt being made on him in the public street, instantly hold his breath,

and use all his powers of resistance to repel the assault. And supposing the handkerchief, which is the alleged weapon, were held forcibly over his mouth and nostrils, in spite of his efforts, yet he would be able to struggle as long, whilst holding his own breath, as if another person were trying to prevent his breathing by the method called Burking. When it is recollected that a race of 150 yards can be run in one breath, these struggles, it will be perceived, would last long enough to attract a crowd.

It is not difficult to understand how the report of the above use of chloroform first gained currency. The first accounts of the use of this agent in surgery and midwifery which appeared in all the newspapers contained a description of its fruity odour and its administration on a handkerchief, but nothing was said of its pungency. Hence many persons, as I had experience, entertained the opinion that it might be used for effecting robberies. By and by, as it was reported, a person who had fallen down in the street thought, on coming to himself, that he recollected something of a handkerchief being applied to his face, and the insensibility from which he had just recovered was attributed to chloroform. It is most likely, if this was anything more than the ingenious invention of the reporter, that the individual in question had taken a fit. The paragraph, however, was a very suitable



one for quotation ; and the idea having gained general credence, it is probable that we shall often hear of it, as prosecutors who have to account for being in disreputable places and company, instead of the usual excuse of having been dining out, will try to remember something of a handkerchief.

I do not wish to apply this explanation to the case tried last week at the Old Bailey, and I cannot explain how the prosecutor got to the room of the prisoners, but I wish to state very distinctly my conviction that it was not by means of chloroform, and that, if anything was administered on a handkerchief in Whitechapel, it must have been some agent unknown to medical men, and which, if the police could

discover it, would probably be of great service to humanity in the hands of legitimate practitioners. In the case tried on Saturday at the Surrey adjourned sessions it is given in evidence that the prisoner suddenly passed a handkerchief across a man's face in the street: they afterwards went into a public-house, and were seen there by a policeman drinking together. The man after this became insensible, and was robbed by the prisoner. The insensibility is attributed to chloroform on the handkerchief, which was suddenly passed across the man's face before he went into the public-house. This every one at all acquainted with the effects of that agent will perceive to be impossible.

Frith Street, Soho,  
Feb. 11th, 1850.