

“INVOLUNTARY HOMICIDE.”—Our Naples Correspondent writes, under date the 27th of November:—“A case was decided last week before the Court of Appeal involving the most harrowing incidents we have heard of for a long time. I relate them, not for their sensational effect, but for the sake of some observations which they suggest. It was called a case of involuntary homicide, which was committed in the small Commune of Castel del Giudice, in the Province of Molise, and the persons accused were the Syndic and the Municipal Doctor. It appears that a poor woman, near her confinement, was suddenly taken ill and sent for the doctor. On his arrival she had fainted, ‘had lost her senses,’ and was pronounced to be dead. On being urged to save the child, at least, the answer was that an operation would be useless; and the woman was buried according to the law of the country within 24 hours after her decease. Several days afterwards the grave was reopened to bury a girl, and it was found that some displacement had occurred in the body of the woman. The report got wind, and an excited population demanded an instant investigation, the result of which was that the swathings by which the legs had been bound were discovered to have been broken, while her hands were raised to the mouth as if the poor creature had desired to tear asunder the ribands by which they were tied together. Worst of all she had given birth to a son, who lay dead by her side. The case was tried in the local Courts and the prisoners found guilty of involuntary homicide. The Court of Appeal, on the 20th of November, while approving the verdict, reduced the punishment to three months’ imprisonment, ‘which was covered,’ says the journal from which I cite the details above, ‘by Sovereign indulgence.’ All was done with perfect legality, yet the circumstances of the case, if well analyzed, show the slight value which is attached to human life in this country, or the imperfect guarantees which exist for the preservation of it. The communal doctor is appointed by the members of the Council, subject to the approval of the Préfet of the Province, and as economy is the order of the day, a stipend is offered scarcely sufficient at times to keep body and soul together. The health of the community is not so much the subject of consideration as the saving of the funds of the commune. How can a certain amount of work be done at the lowest figure? And the consequences are such as might be expected. I am acquainted with one commune at least the health and life of which are supposed to be preserved by the payment of a little more than £60 a year, which is divided by some local arrangement between two members of the faculty. It follows, therefore, that any one with professional talent or ambition would never accept such an appointment, and that the bills of mortality in many a small commune are frightfully increased by the inexperience of some half-fledged practitioner, or by the obtuseness of some elderly, worn-out man who has exhausted the patience of the world. If the criminal law as it is administered sacrifices human lives from consideration for the murderer, the communal law, or communal practice, by its culpable economy in a case of the highest importance, slays its thousands. I am speaking on a subject with which I am well acquainted, and which during an experience of many years has been brought most painfully before my eyes. Both the schoolmaster and the ‘*medico*,’ in spite of the directions of the law as regards the former, are often remunerated with the lowest possible stipends, an evil which has greatly increased since the Italian Government laid claim to a certain proportion of the municipal taxation. I am more concerned, however, at present with the provision which is made for the health and lives of the poor of large communities whom the communal doctor is called upon to serve. It is difficult to suggest remedies for all the evils complained of; but it is clear to me that far greater vigilance should be exercised in ascertaining the capabilities of the man who is to watch over the more dependent of our race, and that a much higher stipend should be paid compulsorily, in proportion to the receipts of the commune, for his services. Of the medical adviser of Castel del Giudice I know nothing; but I have had melancholy experience of many others of his profession, under whose auspices death has reaped abundant harvests.”