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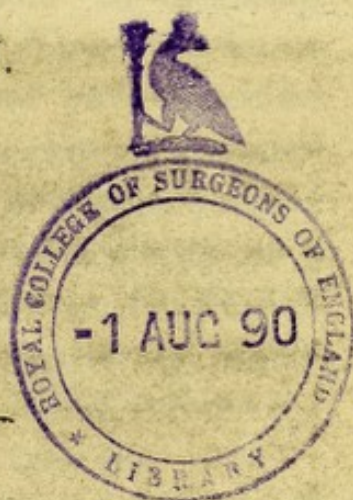
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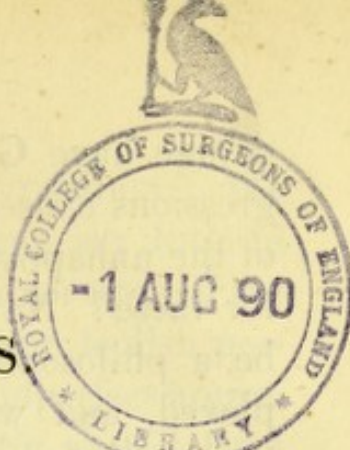
A FEW WORDS ON THE MODERN SYSTEM OF INTERMENT: ITS EVILS AND THEIR REMEDY.

"SUADEAT RATIO QUOD TEMPUS PERSUADEBIT."

BY CHARON.



LONDON:
WILLIAM PICKERING.
1851.



NOTÆ FERALES

IN these days, wherein divine silence seems to have taken flight from this lower earth, and in the multitude of self-elected prophets, it would appear that "chaos was come again," wherein the "cacoe-thes scribendi" has spread to such an alarming extent that every one who has, or fancies he has a thought working in his brain, cannot have peace by day nor rest at night, till his idea is clothed in words and thrust upon the public in the pretentious shape of a printed book, or in the affected modesty of a pamphlet: some apology is needful even for the following few remarks, the subject matter of which cannot fail to be of interest to all, whatever the diversity of opinion with regard to it may be.

There is, we believe, a law which prohibits under pains and penalties, all persons from shooting rubbish on the Queen's highway. It were surely wisdom on the part of the Legislature to make a somewhat similar enactment for the purpose of keeping clear and free from obstruction both the high-ways and bye-ways of literature, so that a plain man might walk on his way without stumbling at every step, or risk of losing his road by a constant attention to petty obstacles. A question of general interest arises, and the British public asks for information. Immediately an avalanche of letters, pamphlets, &c. descends, perfectly blinding and bewildering, and obscuring the subject they are intended to elucidate. What a

deluge have Gorham Controversies, and Papal Aggressions caused to descend upon the devoted head of the unhappy reading public! Who is the better for these? Nay! who is not the worse? He must be a philosopher indeed whose ideas are not perplexed, and whose nerves are not irritated. But "philosophers are only men in armour" after all: and highest philosophy is not altogether proof. Though the heel of Achilles was his only undefended part, yet the arrow found him out. It was a trifling wound, but it rankled and became a great sore: and death ensued. A king of Israel was smitten between the "*joints* of his harness." Though a small insect may be considered a despicable thing; though it be brushed away with a hasty movement, and thought no more of, yet a multitude of these cause no little annoyance, and put the patience to a severe trial, and create an infinite amount of discomfort. A man who can confront a lion without shrinking, is driven beside himself by the worrying of a creature which it requires a microscope to detect. Reason and philosophy give courage to encounter a weighty treatise: but the "continual droppings" of folly and egotism in the shape of small pamphlets, who can endure? "If such be your opinion," will the reader now pertinently observe, "why do you come forward to swell the number of these small annoyances? Either your pretended dislike of them is all affectation: or else you have so great conceit of yourself as to think *your* 'few words' are not to be included in the category of noxious things, wherein your opinion resembles that of every author in respect of his own work." And here we confess that we are placed between the horns of a dilemma, and are fully sen-

sible of the unpleasant nature of our position. We acknowledge our inconsistency, and can say little in extenuation. Yet, considering the importance of the subject, and the many evils arising from foolish prejudices, long continued custom, and imperfect apprehension, — it is surprising that so little should have been written on this matter. And, as the subject ought to be, and, we believe, *is*, one of general interest, we are not without hope that the following remarks, made with a serious desire of mitigating a great evil, and inducing a more rational view of the Practice of Interment than is generally entertained— may be of some use in bringing about a better state of things.

This is the object we have in view. It matters not who we are. One thing is certain: that no one will suppose the writer of these strictures to be an *undertaker*. Ours is only a “voice from the crowd.”

“ Nil refert tales versus quâ voce legantur.”

Without further apology then, we shall proceed to speak of the modern Practice of Interments, and, in so doing, we desire to be guided by reason and common sense, and can assure the reader that we consider Reverence for the Dead to be one of the holiest of human feelings, and that the object of these few words is to increase that reverence, which, we are solemnly convinced the present practice is calculated greatly to diminish. First then; The *Expense* of the modern Practice is an acknowledged evil of great magnitude. The complaint of this is universal. Yet the evil continues: increases rather than diminishes. One class of persons alone attempts to defend it. Only among the undertakers can any

persons be found who have the boldness to assert that the present system is right and reasonable. And even among *them* (whose interest is so nearly concerned) there would seem to be a conviction that the system can no longer be carried on as heretofore, now that public attention has been seriously directed towards it. If it were not so, we should surely have found some ready to come forward, and argue the matter on grounds of reason and propriety, in answer to the many complaints which from time to time have been uttered, and to which publicity has been given by means of the daily press. There has however been scarcely an attempt to do this. And it must be confessed that herein the undertakers have shown no little wisdom. *They know the system to be indefensible.* Deriving, as they do, an exclusive benefit, and conscious that they do so by inflicting an incalculable amount of suffering upon those, who from the nature of their distress, call for our warmest sympathy,—they are well aware that their best advantage is in silence, and that enquiry, provoked by opposition on their part, must inevitably lead to the discontinuance of a system, which enriches a few and impoverishes many, and which can only be maintained by taking an odious advantage of that reverential feeling, which, when duly regulated, is one of the holiest which the human heart is capable of experiencing.

But if the grievance exists, and is really felt to the extent here intimated, why is it suffered to continue? Have not those who suffer, the remedy in their own power? Undoubtedly they have: but they are bound down by the tyranny of custom. We are by no means inclined to despise that habit of clinging

to the traditions of past time, which is characteristic of many minds. As a general rule it unquestionably works for good. But

“What custom wills in all things should we do it,
The dust on antique time would lie unswept,
And mountainous error be too highly heaped,
For truth to overpeer.”*

Unreflecting obedience to whatever is ancient is nothing short of absolute slavery. If it is to be admitted as a principle, there is an end directly to all progress. Independence of thought and action must be crushed at once. Let not the public rashly depart from the “old paths.” Neither let it continue to endure a great evil through a blind acquiescence. “*Suadeat ratio quod tempus persuadebit.*” The public must right itself. Till however a *general* movement be made nothing can be effected. To strike out an independent course demands no slight exertion of moral courage. Individuals can do little, and are unwilling to incur odium without the certainty of accomplishing a real reform, or to expose themselves to the charge of heartless indifference without achieving a more substantial advantage than a saving in a particular instance.

There must be combination among families and friends, and a determined and steady opposition to the present system. If a fixed scale of reasonable charges were agreed upon and closely adhered to under ordinary circumstances, an effectual remedy would be provided. In this as in other matters the rich will of course indulge their own fancies. But the poor who have strong feelings on this subject,

* Shakspeare.

and upon whom the burden falls most heavily, would derive a real and solid advantage. Pomp and extravagance would be no longer considered essential to the funeral rites, but, as they are in truth, a mockery of the dead. And the happy result would be a more decent ceremonial, in every way suited to the solemn occasion. A chastened regret tempered by a lively hope might then be indulged, undisturbed by grosser thoughts which are now thrust upon the mind by reason of an extravagant expenditure. The minds of many are so constituted that custom stands to them in place of reason and reflection, and is an all-sufficient motive. "The predominancy of custom is everywhere visible, insomuch as a man would wonder to hear men profess, protest, engage, give great words, and then do just as they have done before, as if they were dead images and engines, moved only by the wheels of custom."* To combat the opinions of persons such as these were perhaps altogether vain. But we appeal to those who have emancipated themselves from this sort of thralldom, and would fain hope that, in these days, the number of such persons is not small. *They* will acknowledge that in this instance "custom is more honoured in the breach than the observance." The eyes of many are now fully opened to the evils of the present system of Interment, and they feel that, while a great injustice is done to the living, a proper respect for the dead, and a due reverence for our holy religion, are not promoted by the lavish expenditure, and the empty display which now usually accompany the funeral rites. But still the Practice continues as before. Here and there an individual

* Bacon.

has the courage to stand up against it, and brave the obloquy cast upon those whose purity of taste and feeling revolts at a meretricious and vulgar parade, which the occasion makes more than ordinarily offensive, and which can only afford any satisfaction to the unthinking multitude, who delight in any kind of display. But most of those who feel the existence of the evil to its fullest extent remain passive, and submit to it without any attempt at resistance. They do not consider that it is their duty to act according to their convictions. They think it no shame to say

“ Video meliora proboque,
Deteriora sequor.”

There is also another great and positive evil in the modern system.

Not only is a solemn tone of feeling and reverence not promoted by display, but on the contrary such display leads to *irreverence*. A positively bad effect is produced by the present Practice. “ Good things do lose the grace of their goodness when in good sort they are not performed.” All thoughtful persons are agreed as to the desirableness of keeping up a reverential feeling by a due care and attention in conducting the funeral rites. That is a noble as well as a natural feeling, which bids us commit to the tomb with all honour and outward respect those whom in life we have loved, and to whom we have been bound by the fond ties of family affection and friendship. There is a consolation in witnessing the last solemn rites. The entrance “ into the House appointed for all living ” of those who have been dear to us, is made less painful to the survivors when it is accompanied by a decent ceremonial. Heathen and

Christian have ever felt alike on this subject: and the faith of the latter must lead him to testify his reverence for the dead, and the hope which animates himself, by a due care of the remains of those whom the hand of death has removed. But surely none can pretend to say that such an object as this is in any way promoted by the mode in which funerals are now usually conducted. It is impossible to conceive how solemn thoughts can be encouraged, or any elevation of feeling be produced by a vain show which is more suited to a theatrical spectacle than to the awful realities of death. Let those who have beheld the funeral of one who has moved in the higher ranks of society, bear witness as to the effect of the ceremonial upon the spectators. Crowds of the idle and gossiping assemble, who seem to consider the whole affair as a pageant got up expressly for their amusement and gratification. The hearse with its waving plumes, the horses with their velvet trappings, the long train of mourning coaches, and the hired mourners, whose gravity of demeanour, and "decent sorrow," are somewhat disturbed by visions of the "funeral baked meats," and liberal potations presently to follow,—can have no other effect than the amusing of women and children, and gratifying a vulgar love of excitement, except it be that of affording a subject of ridicule to the scoffer, and of making the "judicious grieve." In vain we look for anything in the demeanour of the bystanders which betokens chastened thought, or serious reflection. Does the old man think that his years are fast coming to an end "as it were a tale that is told?" Does the young man reflect that such as that senseless corpse may *he* become by the accident of a moment?

Does the mother take occasion to impress upon her child that death is an awful certainty for which the whole life should be a preparation? * Nothing of the kind. Other thoughts and speculations occupy the minds of the beholders. Such gratification as a savage experiences at any display of finery is the only effect produced. The spectators return to their several occupations. They talk, and gossip, and discuss the character of the deceased, and calculate the expense of the funeral. Then the affair itself is forgotten. But an impression remains, the opposite of that which is desirable. The heart is hardened. It becomes even less sensitive than it was before. Instead of solemn feeling there abides only a cold blooded apathy.

Such is the fatal result of vain and empty display. It is a mockery of the dead: it corrupts and demoralizes the living.

Thus, notwithstanding the inordinate expense, no advantage is attained by following the modern practice of Interment. On the contrary, it gives rise to much *positive evil*. It is vain in itself: ruinous in its consequences: destructive at once to comfort and sound morality. It is surely nothing short of a *pernicious absurdity*. It is rebuked by the beautiful service of the Church of England, the noble simplicity and healthful tone of which, appearing throughout in perfect decorum of expression,—repudiate any association with vanity and pomp, and are calculated to promote reverence of the dead in the minds of the living, and to encourage a just sobriety of thought and feeling.

There is another great evil in the modern system

* "The whole life of the wise is a thinking upon death." *Plato*.

of Interment, to which we would only briefly advert, as our immediate concern is with the funeral itself: viz. the unhealthiness caused by the overcrowding of burial grounds. This is an evil only to be remedied by the interference of the legislature: and such an interference is imperatively called for. The state of many burial grounds in London, and in the large towns generally—destructive as these hot-beds of corruption are to the health of the community—is disgraceful to the boasted civilization of this country, and a shameful abuse, intolerable anywhere, much more among a christian people. Custom can indeed reconcile men to anything, else were it impossible to account for the apathy and indolence exhibited even by those who are immediate sufferers by this overwhelming evil.

That there are many and great difficulties in the way of providing an effectual remedy either by legislation or otherwise may readily be allowed. A measure which in any way interferes with “vested interests” and private rights will always create a clamour, and give dissatisfaction to some parties. But is the public good to be sacrificed for such reasons as these? Something may surely be done which will effect the desired object without affording *reasonable* ground of complaint. In a matter of such vital importance the selfishness of individuals ought not for a moment to be allowed to interfere with the accomplishment of a great public object. The thanks of all sensible men of the present day, and the gratitude of future generations will be awarded to him who shall provide an efficient remedy for this *one evil* of the modern system of Interment, and will amply

repay him for the present endurance of the reproach and vituperation of interested individuals.*

Having passed this censure on the evils of the modern system of Interment, we now feel called upon to suggest a remedy. What we propose may or may not be effective. Let those who reject it put forth a better scheme of their own.

For ourselves : we would strike at the very root of the matter. We would discontinue the system of Interment as now practised, and restore that of *Urn-burial*. The advantages would be incalculable in respect of health, decency, and expense. As a matter of reason and propriety : and of taste and feeling also we avow an unhesitating preference for Urn-burial. "To be knaved out of our graves, to have our skulls made drinking bowls, and our bones turned into pipes, to delight and sport our enemies, are tragical abominations, escaped in burning burials. Urnal interments and burnt relics lie not in fear of worms, or to be an heritage for serpents."* There is but one argument of any weight against urnal Interments : viz. that in the minds of the unthinking the integrity of the doctrine of the Resurrection might be affected. So far however from this being the case we believe that the diffusion of knowledge now so general would prevent this, and the superstitious notions common on the subject would give place to a more sound and rational belief.

* Since the above was written we have read the following in the Athenæum of March 15, 1851. "Government, it appears from the explanations made by Sir George Grey in the House of Commons, has taken the revived question of the London graveyards in hand, and *we may expect soon to see it finally set at rest.*"

† Sir T. Browne.

But as we cannot hope to effect so great a revolution in public opinion as would be necessary to bring about a change from the long continued custom which now prevails, we can but take the system as it is, and endeavour to reform it in its details.

We would say then : Let those who feel the pressure of the evil, come boldly forward to effect the remedy. Let families and friends combine, and organize a determined opposition to the extravagance which weighs down with pecuniary difficulties those who are already oppressed with grief. Let a morbid sensitiveness no longer prevail. Let those who *can* help those who *cannot* help themselves. *The clergy* ought to be the first movers. *They* know well how much positive suffering is occasioned by the morbid feeling which generally prevails, and which paralyses the minds of many. The magnitude of the evil is daily impressed upon the ministers of religion. Let them lift up their voices in public, and use the many opportunities they have in their private intercourse with their parishioners to place this matter in a proper light, and bring about a more rational state of opinion. Let them discountenance pomp and extravagance in connexion with the funeral rites by all means in their power. Let them exhort the dying to leave a last solemn injunction to their relatives that their obsequies may be conducted with economy and simplicity. Let them denounce the present system as contrary to reason and right feeling. Let them use sound argument and invite inquiry : and when the minds of their parishioners are sufficiently prepared, let them call meetings, and endeavour to bring about an uniformity of opinion which shall bear down the opposition of interested persons. Let the folly, the

extravagance, the indecency of the present practice be thoroughly exposed. Then let them agree upon some *definite remedy*. We purposely abstain from pronouncing any opinion as to *what this should be*, as it must ever vary according to local circumstances. Where there is unanimity of feeling there can be no difficulty in determining on a course of action. Only let the clergy see that they have a work to do, and resolve to "do it with their might."

Let them steadily protect those who are unable to protect themselves. Let not the holiest and best of feelings be worked upon to sanction a system of extortion, which enriches a few and impoverishes many; which effects no rational purpose, but makes many a heart ache, and adds to the bitterness of grief, and the poignancy of regret. This will not be the work of a day. But in the end truth and right will prevail.

Funerals will then be conducted with decency and propriety, and without display. Religion and morality will be gainers. The "mouth of fools" will be stopped: and the feelings of none be outraged. Society at large will be greatly benefited: and *the poor* especially will be relieved from a burden which now frequently presses upon them very grievously, and which, in spite of burial-clubs and other institutions of a similar nature, swallows up their scanty earnings, and obliges them to leave their children uneducated, and to forego many of the comforts of life for months together. This is an object surely worth striving for. By the exercise of a little energy it can be attained. And then, devout and solemn thoughts may be indulged, undisturbed by harassing considerations and personal suffering. The

hours sacred to regret will not be broken in upon by distress of a lower kind, nor the edge of natural grief be sharpened by a vain expense imposed by tyrannical custom. The dead will be duly honoured: and the living will be able to say,—calmly contemplating the passage into eternity of him who has gone before. “Vale, vale, nos te ordine quo natura permittat sequemur.”

