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CREMATION.

It is now nearly thirty years since Lord Beaconsfield proposed *Sanitas sanitatum et omnia sanitas* as a battle cry for an impending election. It did not excite much enthusiasm, as drains and water supplies do not appeal strongly to the popular imagination. Nevertheless, the great movement of sanitary reform, which may be said to have begun with the Victorian era, is still gaining fresh force as it goes, and is steadily extending in directions undreamt of by its initiators. It is true that our lawgivers are still apt to regard sanitary reform as almost a negligible quantity in the struggle for votes, and so matters that vitally concern the public health are passed over as of little importance, or, worse still, are treated as mere playthings in the game of political battledore and shuttlecock. But on the whole, thanks mainly to the self-sacrificing efforts of the medical profession, the advance of sanitary reform has been steady nearly all along the line.

There is, however, one direction in which progress is disappointingly slow. Although from the sanitary point of view cremation is undoubtedly the best method of disposing of the bodies of the dead, it must be confessed that it does not make much headway among us. The progress of any reform which touches a traditional sentiment must always be slow, and it was not therefore to be expected that cremation should yet have entirely taken the place of earth burial. But it is now thirty-three years since cremation was brought before the people of this country by the late Sir Henry Thompson, and although the storm of opposition with which the proposal was then received has subsided, it is to be feared that it has been followed by an attitude of indifference which is yet more inimical to progress. Whereas the

number of cremations carried out in Great Britain in 1906 was 732, being an increase of 138 as compared with the previous year, in 1907 the number, as shown by figures kindly supplied to us by Mr. Herbert T. Herring, Medical Referee of the Cremation Society of England, was 705. The number of crematories at work is still 13, of which 6—at Hull, Leeds, Leicester, Sheffield, Bradford, and Ilford—are municipal. The cremations were distributed as follows: Golder's Green, 290; Woking, 108; Manchester, 96; Liverpool, 34; Glasgow, 30; Hull, 17; Darlington, 8; Leicester, 12; Birmingham, 33; Leeds, 16; Ilford, 18; Bradford, 13; Sheffield, 18. The total number of cremations carried out since the establishment of the first crematorium at Woking is 6 469. It is to be noted that although the total in 1907 showed decrease, there was an increase at some places. Thus at Manchester there were 96 as against 90 the previous year; at Birmingham 33 as against 25; at Leeds 16 as against 15; the largest increase being at Sheffield, where the number rose from 6 to 18. In the number of crematories Yorkshire stands easily first among the counties of Great Britain, having no fewer than 5. At these, taken collectively, there has been practically no decrease.

Cremation in this country is almost wholly confined to persons of some intellectual distinction. The average citizen is still held in the bondage of custom, in which sentiment has taken root so deeply as to make it hard to eradicate. This is doubtless the explanation of the fact that cremation so far has failed to become general. That there was a slight decrease last year is probably due to accidental causes; it must not be taken as indicating any renewal of the feeling against it which Sir Henry Thompson and the Cremation Society have done so much to remove; but the decrease is none the less to be regretted.

The religious objection has to a considerable extent died out with the decline of materialistic interpretations of Christian teaching. It may be pointed out in connexion with this aspect of the matter that cremation would solve a difficulty which must make itself increasingly felt in regard to burial in churches. Many rectors and other church authorities are already compelled to refuse a privilege which is dearly valued by not a few; the closing of the vaults of Westminster Abbey and St. Paul's to the remains of our illustrious dead is now simply a question of time. But there would be no difficulty in finding room for urns

containing the ashes of cremated bodies in the vaults of churches. These would be more graceful memorials of the dead than the ordinary tombstone hiding a process of corruption revolting to think of, and would, further, be harmless to the living. Religious rites are applicable to the burning as well as to the burial of bodies, and by the Cremation Act of 1902 any clerk in Holy Orders of the Church of England may, "with the permission of "the bishop and at the request of the executor of the "deceased person or of the burial authority or other "person having charge of the cremation or interment "of the cremated remains," perform the service if the incumbent of any ecclesiastical parish refuses to do so. Cremation need not, therefore, entail the forfeiture of "Christian burial."

Many persons live in fear of being buried alive, and make provision in their wills that a doctor shall "mak' sikkar" by dividing a main artery or thrusting a knife through the heart. The carrying into effect of this precaution cannot in any case be anything but an unpleasant duty, and it is made all the more disagreeable by the fact that it is totally unnecessary. The haunting fear to which reference has been made will cease to trouble any one who knows the precautions insisted on before cremation can take place.

The most important argument that has been urged against cremation is the destruction of evidence of foul play which it is supposed necessarily to involve. Here again must be taken into account the fact that the certification of death required before a body can be cremated is of a much stricter character than that for burial. The forms of application and certification are drawn up with the special object of getting the fullest possible information and preventing the fraudulent concealment of relevant facts. The medical attendant must certify as to the fact and cause of death, and a confirmatory certificate must be given by an independent practitioner of special qualifications, which are set forth in the Act. Every cremation authority must appoint a medical referee and a deputy, to be approved by the Home Secretary. To this official the certificates are submitted, and on his authority only is cremation allowed to take place. Where the cause of death has not been definitely ascertained by the certifying doctors, the medical referee requires that a *post-mortem* examination shall be made by a medical practitioner expert

in pathology, appointed by the cremation authority, or in cases of emergency by himself. The following facts will show how strictly the rules are enforced. Since the Home Office regulations under the Cremation Act came into force—that is to say, from May 1st, 1903, to December 31st, 1907—1,739 cases were submitted for cremation to the medical referee. Of these 7 were referred to the coroner, who held an inquest in 3, and thought one unnecessary in 4. In 31 cases certificates were referred back to the doctors for further information or owing to some irregularity in filling up the form. In 20 a *post-mortem* examination was ordered by the medical referee. In 4 cases the medical referee refused to authorize cremation, and in 6, in which the deceased persons were from abroad, it was found impossible to comply with the statutory regulations. Thus of the total number of cases submitted to the medical referee, in 68, or nearly 4 per cent., further information was required or the necessary authorization was refused.* It will be seen, therefore, that under the system of certification required for cremation crime is much less likely to escape detection than under the comparatively loose certification required for burial. No system that human ingenuity can devise will absolutely prevent the possible occurrence of error; but at any rate it may be said that the Home Office regulations reduce this possibility to a minimum. And even granting that the traces of a crime may occasionally be destroyed, the advantages of cremation in every other respect are so great as to more than counterbalance this possible disadvantage.

It should be mentioned that considerable improvements have been made since the original Gorini furnace was first introduced. This is notably the case in regard to the refining of the ash residue, which makes the removal of the body from the coffin unnecessary. The arrangements for placing the coffin in the incinerating chamber have also been perfected; the process is now performed mechanically, and thus the necessity of handling or disturbing the body is obviated. The incinerating chamber is separate from the heat-generating chamber, so that the ashes do not come in contact with the fuel. These improvements tend to make the procedure not only more cleanly, but more reverent in the manner in which the remains are dealt with.

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* These figures refer to Woking and to Golder's Green only.

Lastly, it should be said that the belief pretty generally held that cremation is a costly process, has no foundation in fact. At Golder's Green, for instance, the average cost of cremation, together with a niche in the columbarium and a memorial tablet, is 13 guineas. An estimate of the cost of burial, with a memorial stone, based on the average cost of interment in the ordinary ground at six London cemeteries, is 18 guineas. Cremation has, therefore, the advantage of economy as well as greater decency in the disposal of the bodies of the dead than the insanitary method still generally adopted.

How is the public to be educated to a right appreciation of the advantages of cremation? As we have shown, it is a matter which interests not only the friends of the dead but the whole community. Whether we conceive of the body as a machine which has ceased to act, or as

> a worn-out fetter that the soul
> Has broken and thrown away,

it is essential that it should not be allowed to taint the air we breathe or to befoul the water we drink. The medical profession might, we think, do more than it has yet done collectively in insisting on the sanitary advantages of cremation, and we have no doubt that the help of many of the clergy might be enlisted to further the cause. A debt of public gratitude is due to the Cremation Society and to all who are endeavouring to promote this better way in the disposal of the bodies of the dead.