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The upper Rhine

the scenery of its banks and the manners of its people

Mayence to the lake of Constance

Mayhew, Henry

London, 1858

§ 4.. Customs at Death-German Cemeteries-Death-Omens-Death-Saeraments-Death-Bills-Fear of being Buried Alive-Funerals-and Time of Mourning

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sides, is exactly like the lower deck of a ship, and gives one the notion, as the horses' feet tramp on the boards with the same hollow sound as they do on the stage of a theatre, that we are travelling in a mail-coach from end to end of the "*orlop*" of the "Great Eastern."

Then, as the diligence darts into the light at the other extremity, the sunbeams flash in the eyes with the same blinding brilliance as they do when issuing from a railway-tunnel, and the horses begin to labour up the equally steep hill on the opposite shore—the village dwindling and dwindling below as the vehicle ascends.

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§ 4.

Customs at Death—German Cemeteries—Death-Omens—Death-Sacraments—Death-Bills—Fear of being Buried Alive—Funerals—and Time of Mourning.

A country churchyard in England, with its long rank grass, half-hiding the heavy stone tablets on the ground—with its dilapidated and tumble-down headstones, to graves that are barely a score of years old—would lead the foreigner to conclude that we were a nation that cared but little for our dead; whereas the trim garden-like character of a Parisian cemetery, where every grave is a flower-bed—and where you see the toys of the lost children enshrined in glass-cases at the head of their little tombs—where you can tell, too, by the different tints of the wreaths of "*immortelles*," (passing by gentle gradations, from the bright yellow chaplet of almost

yesterday into the deep brown of extreme age), how regularly the funereal flower-bed has been visited;—all would induce a belief that French people had far more tender hearts and lasting memories than our own race.

Nevertheless, a long residence in the two countries will, we are satisfied, give rise to an opposite opinion; for the very display of grief which originally cheated us into admiration of the people indulging in it is sure, ere long, to assume a hideous theatrical air in our eyes, and thus to produce a violent revulsion of feeling both for the trick and the tricksters.

"God alone knows my sorrow."

Such was the inscription on an "*immortelle*" that we saw a gentleman in deep black hang upon a broken shaft in the *Cimetière Montmartre*, with the view of publishing his grief to the whole world.

What the Great Teacher said of Prayer, may be aptly applied to grief. If, as He told us, there is no trust to be put in those who love to pray in public places, so is there little truth to be found in those who weep "that they may be seen of men:" for as surely as devout hearts "enter their closets and *shut the door*," in order to offer up their worship "in secret," so do sincere mourners keep their lamentations for the honest privacy of the same place.

Again, this conversion of the grave into the parterre appears to our mind to spring from defective faith as to the spiritual essence of our natures, and to be based on a gross material belief that the body constitutes the entire being; seeming, indeed, but little removed in its wisdom from the practices of the old Egyptians, who stinted themselves through life in order that their carcass might obtain greater glorification after death.

The frippery of the French cemeteries prevails to a great extent throughout Prussia. In the "*Friedhof*," however, the

grove-like walks are not skirted, as in France, by a row of private chapels, like miniature park-lodges, and fitted with glazed doors, so that the public may *see* the afflicted praying at the altar within. To do the people justice, too, there is less melodramatic ostentation about their burial-grounds: nor is the gate beset by a disgusting crowd of obtrusive hawkers of "*immortelles*," who, as you pass, urge your attention to a "*superbe*" chaplet "*à mon ange;*" or maybe to one embroidered with the flowery fib, "JE PLEURE TOUJOURS."

The death-omens which are popular only among nervous old women, and country folk, and serving-girls, with us, prevail in Prussia among the so-called educated classes; for we have known many a Herr Lehrer (Mr. Teacher) to have his brain choke-full of the most childish and impious superstitions. Indeed, we have sat and smiled inwardly, the evening through, at the scholastic jolter-heads, whilst they enlightened us as to how the howling of a restless dog in the night had foretold the death of Herr Somebody, and how a vagrant "*Nacht-eule*" (night-owl) had played the prophet, and announced the approaching decease of some well-known invalid—better than the first physician in the land could have done. We have been informed, too, whilst the Professor grew warm with his subject (and our *Kirschwasser*), how necessary it is, on a death occurring in a house, to move the tub of "*Sauer-kraut*"—if only an inch—away from its former place in the cellar, in order to prevent its becoming too rotten even for a Deutscher's stomach to relish; and, likewise, to tap with the knuckles at every cask of wine that may be in the *Keller*, to stop its turning into downright, unmitigated vinegar. We have heard, moreover, how in the country it is customary, even at the village parsonage, for some one to go into the garden immediately after a decease, and tell each swarm of bees (if hives be kept)

that their master or mistress is dead; and when we smiled at the exquisite simplicity of the superstition, the wiseacre—who, though deep in the Greek metres, was unable to distinguish between accidental association and necessary connexion in nature—proceeded to cite chapter and verse to us as to how Herr Someone had failed to perform the ceremony at Herr Somebody's, who lived in the Westerwald somewhere, whereupon every bee in the apiary had sickened and died.

In every foreign Catholic town, however, a surer sign of approaching death than either the nocturnal cries of the dog or the screech-owl consists in the appearance of a robed priest in the streets, hurrying along as he carries a silver chalice between his two raised hands, whilst a small scarlet-petticoated boy proceeds before him bearing a silver cross on a high pole. From our window, looking as it does down the long vista of linden-trees that line the "Parade Platz" of Coblenz, we see some such priest in his short lace-frock and his black mitre-cap come hastening along the path twice or thrice a-week, while the drivers of the passing ox-wagons fall to doffing their hat and making faint attempts at genuflexion.

Now, this "ciborium" contains what Papists call "gods," and Protestants wafers, and in the "*heilige Oel-büchse*," which the priest carries beneath his robes, is treasured the blessed "oil of extreme unction"—oil that is used only at death for the purification of the five senses; and such is the belief of the pious in the virtue of these holy "remedies" (*Heilmitteler*), against everlasting misery, that no good Catholic dies easy in his bed unless he have received what is styled in German, "*die heiligen Sterbe-sakramente der Catholischen Kirche*"—the holy death-sacrament of the Catholic Church.

This oil of extreme unction is regarded with profound reverence by the people, even to the last; for it is customary

for the priest to receive a fresh supply of the blessed unguent from his bishop every year, the bishop having it from the Pope, and the Pope—of course, from his Holiness's tallow-chandler. Annually, on the Saturday in Passion-week, all that may remain of the supply for the preceding twelvemonth is publicly burnt by the priest, when the zealous peasants beg for pieces of the coal which served to consume the sacred fat. These cinders are regarded as charmed relics, and with them three black crosses are drawn on the stable-doors of the farm-houses on May night — as an infallible enchantment against imps and witches.

Good Catholics usually die with the crucifix in their hand; but should it happen otherwise, the sacred symbol is placed in the palm, whilst lighted candles are set to burn continually around the bed, and the family kneel beside it praying for the repose of the departed soul. Such prayers, in Prussia, generally continue for three days; and it is customary during that time for the friends and relations, or even neighbours, to visit the house and assist at the ceremonies, or else to take part in sitting up with the corpse at night.

So sure a harbinger of death is the sight of the priest on his mission of anointment, that on the morrow, probably, you will hear of the Church Custos being out on his rounds, delivering small hand-bills at the houses in the neighbourhood of the decease; announcing, within a black border, the cause and time of death, as well as the day and hour on which the funeral is to take place; and not unfrequently having a prayer appended at the back of the paper, invoking rest for the soul of the departed.

Here is a literal translation of a touching specimen of such documents:—

Jesus! Maria! Joseph!

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."
Matt. v. 8.

To the pious Prayer of the fellow-Scholars, and to all believers, commend we the Soul

of

Emil D_____

Belonging to the third form of the Grammar-School.

He was, during the short term of his life, continually the joy and pride of his parents, and, in the school and church, always willing and obedient. But doubly grieved are his parents and relations on account of the manner of his death; for at the age of 12 years and 10 months, just at the ripening of his youth, he fell from the third story of his father's house to the pavement, and thence to the cellar. After he had lain 8 hours in unconscious death-struggles the angel conducted him from this to a better life. He died at 4h. 30m. on the morning of the 6th July, 1854.

The burial is fixed for Thursday, the 8th July, at 3 p.m. The Requiem will take place on Friday, the 9th July, at 9 a.m., at the Parish Church of Our Dear Lady.

House of Death, Mehlgasse, No. 9.

He sleeps in Peace!

BLB BADISCHE LANDESBIBLIOTHEK
Baden-Württemberg

Prayer.

O Jesus, Thou friend of innocent children, to whom Thou promisedst the Kingdom of Heaven, take pity upon Thy servant Emil, whom Thou hast snatched in Thy Almighty wisdom from this world of sorrow and trouble. Blot out all that was weak and sinful in him, and let him enter into the everlasting peace of Thy chosen people, O Thou who livest and reignest for ever and ever. Amen.

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About four hundred of these bills are printed for "ordinary" people, and eight hundred for the wealthier gentry, whilst one thousand occasionally may be distributed "for a banker." Every person at whose house a hand-bill is left is supposed to be invited to the funeral. No lists of friends are furnished to the Custos who distributes them, as, owing to the smallness of the town, that functionary mostly knows all the relatives and associates of the deceased; neither are letters sent to the family friends, except when far away.

Simultaneously with the distribution of the above bills, a like announcement is made in the newspaper of the town. Nor are these advertisements the mere dry concise statements that are customary in our own journals; for it is by no means unusual for the bereaved publicly to sue for pity: thus:—

"To distant acquaintances and friends we dedicate this sorrow-message (*Trauer-Botschaft*), with the entreaty for deep sympathy," says one such advertisement before us.

"Your deep sympathy is requested," curtly runs another.

Other advertisements, however, will conclude with a notice, that "the business of the deceased is to be conducted upon the same liberal terms as before;" whilst others, again, may end with the following ostentation of affliction and worldly rank:—

"Over his grave are weeping the deeply sorrowing

FRIEDRICH VON B——, *Privy-councillor of Justice at* ——.

LUDWIG VON B——, *Privy-councillor for Appeals in Justice and Equity at* ——.

KARL VON B——, *Councillor of Justice at* ——.

GEORGE VON B——, *Privy Councillor of Finance at* ——."

Many, too, contain little sad histories of the bitter misfortune that has fallen on the family; as the subjoined —which we copy from the "COBLENZER ZEITUNG"—will testify:—

On June the 29th, of the present year, died at New York, my only and much-be'oved Son, Friedrich Wilhelm, who had hardly attained his 25th year. He expired 24 hours after his arrival in America, in the arms of his family, who had longed for his return from Europe. On his embarking at Calais he had slightly hurt his shin-bone, which was not attended to at the time. It soon, however, forced him to seek medical aid, though not with the expected success. Upon his arrival at New York the cleverest surgeons were consulted; but after an operation which promised the most favourable result, he gently died from the hæmorrhage of the small arteries.

To all friends and relations at a distance I hereby announce the sad news. As they can well understand my deep grief, they will excuse me from specially communicating with them concerning my inconsolable affliction.

In him died the best of sons, the most faithful husband and friend, and the most tender father.

F—— F—— F——.

Coblenz, July 1855.

Moreover, after the burial, one may occasionally see a copy of verses published by some rhyming friend in memory of the many virtues of the deceased, and with a notice appended informing the public that (we quote from the Coblenz Journal) "over the grave wept the wife, a brother, five sons, six daughters-in-law, forty-five grandchildren, and three great-grandchildren."

A hundred years ago *we* indulged in the same ghastly funereal pride. The obituaries inserted a century back in our magazines and newspapers gave all the details of the fortunes left by the deceased. The *London Magazine* for October, 1735, for instance, contains the following pompous announcements:—

"At Littlecot, in the county of Wilts, Francis Popham, Esq.; a gentleman of 7000*l.* fortune."

"Sir John Tash, Knt., Alderman of Walbrook Ward, in the sixty-first year of his age; reputed worth 200,000*l.*"

Now, surely, such a mixture of showy lamentation with worldly pride and worldly business must give even those who cannot see deeper into human nature than a French dramatic author a sad idea of the sham character of German society at the present day: especially when we couple it with the remembrance that the very widowers (who are so ready to prostrate themselves with the heaviness of their grief in the public journals, and to flood the columns of newspapers with their tears) are often known to be re-married, as we have stated, before even the "*Zeitung*" announcing their "irreparable loss" has been torn up into pipe-lights.

Throughout Germany there seems to be a profound fear of being buried alive. This naturally proceeds from the scientific ignorance of the people, as well as deficient faith in the skill of their doctors; so that all kinds of precautions are taken to prevent such an occurrence. The law enacts, that

no person shall be buried until 72 hours after apparent death, and then only upon the production of a doctor's certificate; and in villages, where it often happens that no doctor has attended the deceased in his last moments, it provides that the schoolmaster and "*Schöffe*" (headborough) should inspect the corpse, to see if they can distinguish the "yellow death-spots on the bowels;" for which office they are paid two groschens (twopence) each: "but," said one who had often performed the duty, "we do not trouble ourselves to look very hard at that price."

Nor has the priest the power to bury any one, unless furnished with the certificate, either of the doctor or the above village authorities.

Despite such provisions, however, against burial during "suspended animation," many people still prefer to have the open coffin placed in the dead-house for a week, for in such places there is a peculiar apparatus for rousing the attendants of the burying-ground, in case of any one being restored to life. This consists of an alarm fixed in the watchman's room, and having a long cord attached to it, so as to communicate with the coffin in the adjacent dead-house. The cord ends in a small loop or ring, and this is passed over the thumb of the corpse; so that the least motion in the body may be sure to alarm the attendant.

None of our German friends had ever heard of a return to consciousness having been made known by such means. A gentleman, however, told us that once the alarm, having been attached to the corpse of a woman who had died from dropsy, had been made to ring by a sudden collapse of the body, and consequent dropping of the hands.

The funeral usually takes place on the third day after death, and in the newspaper of the previous afternoon there

will, perhaps, be an announcement, saying that those friends of the late A—— B—— who may wish to follow his body to the grave, are invited to assemble at the "house of death" on such-and-such an afternoon at such-and-such an hour.

As our apartments look towards the "*Mainzer-thor*" (Mayence Gate), which leads to the cemetery outside the town, scarcely a day passes but we notice one or two funeral processions stealing slowly towards some poor creature's last home. Indeed, we can see one emerging from the "*Schloss-strasse*" as we write, and as this is the most fashionable street in the town, the mourners, of course, are many, and the appointments of the train are of the showiest character.

As the procession turns the corner of the street, the chant of the "*Misericordia*" comes floating down the road, borne in mournful gusts along the avenue of trees. That large, bright-coloured silk flag, which is seen immediately behind the silver cross at the head of the procession, and keeps flapping like a heavy sail in each passing breeze, is the emblem of one of the city companies, to which the deceased belonged. Then, as the funeral dirge grows louder, we see, between the stems of the trees that skirt the roadway, the three lace-robed priests conducting the ceremony, their forms half-filmed over with the white cloud of incense that rises from the silver censers, as the boys flash them to and fro in the sunbeams. On either side of the priests are the church-choristers and the Orphan-School boys (the latter being there to mark that the deceased was a patron of the charity); and these, as they draw near, make the air moan again with their chanting. Next comes the tiny-looking hearse, that is hardly bigger, and of the same shape, as our tilted carts. This is covered with a huge black velvet pall, ornamented with an immense yellow and white cross, and reaching nearly to the ground. On either side of the hearse walk a number of the nearest friends of

the family, each carrying a lighted candle, which is as long and thick as a torch, and the flame of which is invisible in the broad daylight, though it flickers in the wind, and the tallow gutters so that each gentleman is provided with a white napkin to protect his hands from the dripping grease.

As the procession approaches the "*Rhein-strasse*," the women and men come running out of the shops and houses; and whilst the male spectators bare their heads, the females make the sign of the cross and count the candles as the hearse goes by—for it is by the number of attendant lights that the grandeur of a funeral is estimated.

After the hearse walk the male members of the family of the deceased; then comes a long black train of friends and acquaintances, marching three a-breast; and, finally, two or three carriages, sent out of respect by the principal hotel-keepers of the town.

The procession is now on its way to the "*Castor Kirche*," and there, after the performance of the burial-service, the priests, choristers, and candle-bearers, all leave the hearse; so that shortly we shall see the funeral train return cropped of its gloomy pomp, and with merely the relatives walking in its wake. In this manner it will proceed towards the cemetery, where, if we followed it, we should see the coffin lowered—without a priest and without a word—into the newly-made grave; after which the grave-digger would hand the nearest relative a spade to cast the first shovelful of earth upon the coffin-lid, and, when a like duty had been performed by all the other friends upon the spot, the family would take one last look at the remains, and all would be at an end.

This is what the Germans style being "buried with silver;" whereas the poor are "buried with copper," the church ornaments used on the latter occasion consisting of the baser metal only, and the officiating clergy being limited to one

priest, instead of three. The candles, too, rarely, if ever, exceed a dozen at the funerals of the humbler classes (and are provided by the candle-bearers themselves), whereas they occasionally reach a score or more at those of the wealthy; and, when the deceased is an unmarried female, maidens in long black veils are employed to carry the lights.

Another more important funereal distinction is, that the very rich have the "*Hof-glocke*" (town-bell) tolled at their decease, and, though the ringing of this bell costs ten thalers (about 30 shillings), some persons give orders for it whilst on their death-bed.

Again our customs of the past century were kindred to the foregoing. "We have before us," says the author of the *Eighteenth Century*, "an undertaker's bill of a date as late as September, 1780, for the funeral of a person of the middle class, which amounts to 61*l.* odd, and contains, among others, the following items:—

	£	s.	d.
"To 32 men for carrying of ye lights at 2*s.* 6*d.*	4	0	0
To 32 branches for ditto	0	5	4
To 68 lbs. of wax candles for ditto at 3*s.* per lb.	10	4	0
To 2 beadles attending ye corps with silk dressing and gowns, &c. &c. . .	1	10	0."

The priests employed on such occasions are (we were assured by one who knew them well) great sticklers for their fees, seldom or never foregoing a groschen of their perquisites, even in cases of extreme poverty. As an instance of this, our friend (who, it should be stated, was himself a Papist) cited a case that had formed part of his own experience. A peasant in the Hundsrück lost his wife in child-bed, and, though he was so poor that he could not even provide a coffin, and the neighbours had each to contribute a board

towards making a "shell" for the poor creature, the man of God stood out, hard and fast, for his dues. Nor would the Jesuit bate one groschen of the fee: so the "*Bauer*" was obliged to sell his goat—though it was the only hope he had of obtaining milk for his motherless babe—in order to satisfy the greed of the *Christian* minister.

German Protestants (for the above descriptions refer more particularly to the Romish ceremonies) have generally the burial-service read in their own rooms, whilst the coffin still remains open, and the friends assembled round it. Those invited to the ceremony bring flowers, which are strewn over the corpse previous to the coffin being nailed down—a ceremony which is always performed in the presence of the relatives. Neither do the Lutherans indulge in any service at the grave, nor any chanting in the streets.

When unmarried Protestants, either male or female, die, they are dressed in a white muslin shroud, and have three rows of artificial flowers put down the front of the winding-sheet, a crown of myrtle placed on their head, and a white rose in one hand.

The door of the house is then left open for whomever likes to enter and look at the body, and it is often matter of boast in neighbouring families as to which of them has had the prettiest corpse. One will say to the other, "*My* dead sister was dressed much handsomer than *your* dead brother was."

The English work entitled "Illustrations of the Manners and Customs of our Grandfathers" affords us another proof that this present Rhenish custom is the same ghastly mockery as our people were wont to indulge in a hundred years ago: for we find it there stated, that after the searchers had examined the body there came a person who was called the "plumper," whose business it was, we are told, to bedizen

the body, and make what the ladies called a "charming corpse."*

Moreover, it is usual with the Lutherans to cover the coffins of the unmarried with a black pall, and to throw a white net over that, decorated with artificial flowers. Upon these a wreath of ivy is placed, with an elegy on the deceased inscribed upon paper cut in the form of a heart. The coffin is followed to the cemetery by twelve of the best young female friends, in deep mourning, and the youngest of these takes the ivy-wreath and the verses and places them on the grave, after which they return home and have cake and wine.

The corpses of married Lutherans, on the other hand, are dressed simply in white, the flowers being omitted, and the pall to the coffin being a plain black one. The body is followed to the grave by twelve of the immediate neighbours of the deceased.

When either parent dies, the mourning, according to routine, lasts for a year, whilst six months is the period prescribed by custom for a grown-up sister or brother. If, however, the lost brother or sister had been but recently confirmed, the fashionable term for lamentation is not longer than a quarter of a year; and should any child, on the other hand, happen to die *un*confirmed, it is not mourned for at all.

Our informant added, that the reason for this seeming disregard of the young was, "that children were considered to be free from sin;" or, in other words, irresponsible creatures up to the period of their confirmation.

By law, widows are not allowed to marry until ten months after the decease of their husband, so that there may be no dispute as to the parentage of any child they may bear subsequent to the death of their first partner.

By custom, on the other hand, a widower, as we have said,

* See "Oxford and Cambridge Monthly Miscellany," Sept. 1750.

may re-enter into the marriage state as soon after the loss of his wife as he pleases. "Perhaps," said a German to us, "if he were to marry again within a fortnight, we *might* think it a little *curiose;* but he could hardly get the ceremony performed in so short a time, for the burial is not over till three days, and even if the banns are not published, it will take about a week to procure a license. Besides," he added, "no one can marry during the four weeks of Advent, nor during Lent, without obtaining dispensation from the bishop; so, you see, we could not well manage it so soon as in two weeks. Oh! yes, I have known many widowers get re-married in one month, and that by banns, too. Why, there is Herr So-and-so," he went on, giving the name; "but then he had many young *Kinder*, and babies cannot be trusted to a girl under twelve years of age: so a poor man, or a shopkeeper with a large family, *must* get another *Frau* as soon as possible, in order to have some one to look after his children."

In conclusion, English readers will hardly require to be told that the Germans have little internal sense of the sacredness of death.

"Give me joy, Frau ——," said a *Schreiner* (joiner), on meeting a female friend in the street; "I have a coffin to make for thirty thalers." And the man rubbed his hands and smiled, as if he were incapable of feeling that his own good fortune arose out of the bitterest misery that can befall a fellow-creature.

But that we may not be thought to draw conclusions from a professional undertaker as to the general insensibility of the *Deutschers* concerning the most solemn matters, let us add, that even German children are unmoved by the awfulness of death.

One of the Professors of the schools was telling the young

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members of his family that little Fritz, their playmate—who was known to have the best collection of "*Schmetterlings*" (butterflies) in the school—had died suddenly that morning.

"And who'll have his butterflies?" cried the Professor's youngest son, an urchin of eight years old.

Interpolated Rhenish Scenes.

(12.)

SCHAFFHAUSEN.

This picturesque old town is situate on the right bank of the Rhine, a little above the long line of rapids and falls which render the river unnavigable between Schaffhausen and Basel; and though it is the capital of the Canton to which it gives its name, it has more of the character of the gate, or *entrance* to Switzerland, than that of an integrant portion of the country itself.

It still bears, indeed, every appearance of an old Suabian imperial city, for not only are its streets marked with many of the quaint forms of mediæval architecture (the town having for ages escaped the ravage of fire), but the language, costumes, and manners, as well as the easy and peaceful disposition of its people, are all akin to those of its neighbours located in the towns throughout the Black Forest.

The origin of Schaffhausen dates as far back as the 8th century, when a small colony of boatmen, we are told, settled in the place, and constructed some boat-sheds, or *skiff-houses*, as rude dépôts for the cargoes of the vessels coming from the Lake of Constanz, and which had to be discharged here-