

A LAY SERMON ON CHURCHYARDS AND EPITAPHS.

In an hour of morbid melancholy the poet sings of earth becoming "dark with the shadows of the tombs." It is an unnatural and repulsive idea to associate skulls and crossbones and the like horrible paraphernalia with Death, to paint him as a gaunt skeleton armed with a scythe, wandering to and fro in the world, ruthlessly mowing down youth and age. It is better philosophy and better religion to figure Death as one of God's brightest angels continually travelling between earth and heaven, bearing messages of love, with voice soft as the autumn wind, that whispers to the dying blossom, and hand as gentle as the snow-flakes that weave their shroud above the perished flower.

"Weep not for the dead, neither bemoan him," was the counsel of the prophet of old, but how difficult the task to act upon it. Bereavement mourns over the grave as if the one she loved was lying in the darkness beneath; she will not pause to reflect, to know and comfort herself with the knowledge that all that endeared the lost one,—lost only for awhile,—the nobleness of soul, the beauty of mind, go not down into the grave, but rise from the bed of death upon the wings of immortality. It is the dust alone which returns to the dust.

"The luxury of woe" has lost much of its spiritual significance, and is become grossly materialised. Nowadays it has a price in the market. We measure our grief by the length of our crape. We have establishments whose "melancholy pleasure" is to supply mourning at various rates and in various shades, so as to accommodate the wildest heartbreak and the most microscopic grief. Only at the grave do we discover what a good or amiable or noble-hearted individual the departed was. We get up subscriptions for a monumental tomb to the genius or talent that for nigh a lifetime begged a morsel of bread from us, and got a stone,—after death,—and we inscribe on it an epitaph to tell posterity how highly the departed was honoured during life, how deeply regretted after death. "False as an epitaph," is an old saying. "Here lies," is a common and equivocal commencement. There is a painting in Hampton Court, representing the Day of Judgment; the graves are open, and some of the reanimated corpses are rushing about, carrying their tombstones with them, unfortunately the artist has been beneath a tombstone for a century or two, and the idea he wished to convey is buried with him. Could it be that he supposed the dead would on the Great Day of Account use their then epitaphs as testimonials?

An epitaph is too frequently an ornamental grief, if it were not so, nothing could teach a more solemn lesson; nothing could better win the heart of man to think kindlier of his fellow-men; for all that was lovable in a friend becomes still more lovely, all that was hateful in one we deemed an enemy is robbed of ugliness when friend and enemy are laid in the grave. Death draws a curtain between us and the departed through which we see them beatified, as we see a calmer loveliness in the landscape when veiled in the golden haze of the morning.

It is a feeling of natural piety that causes us to record upon the gravestone the name and virtues of the deceased; and those that say,

"We have no need of names or epitaphs.
We talk about the dead by our firesides,"

are actuated by a feeling flowing from the same source. Each churchyard is a volume of Earth's great treatise on Death; its printed pages are the records on the tombstones; there are in it also blank pages—nameless graves—eloquent in their silence. Nature bends her blue eye on each hillock in the churchyard, nothing unlovely or repulsive meets her gaze; she only sees that which was once the tenement of a soul,

"Turning to daisies gently in the grave."

It was a beautiful thought of olden Saxon piety to name the burial-ground God's Acre,—a sacred land at whose borders man should put off pride and vanity; a field never to be upturned by the plough, into which the husbandman should never cast the grain to be quickened for the sickle of the reaper; where that seed alone may be sown which is to corrupt amid corruption, and to rise incorruptible when God gathers in the harvest of time.

An epitaph being the utterance of sorrow, should be brief. The character of the individual whom it commemorates should

be given, but not in detail,—a scrupulous minuteness is apt to convey the impression that the truth has not been strictly adhered to, and a multiplicity of words is generally the index of assumed sorrow. An old epigram says,

"With most of epitaphs I'm grieved,
So very much is said
One half will never be believed,
The other never read."

If the departed was a kind husband, let that be said, without noting the various domestic duties which he so lovingly discharged; if a charitable man, let the simple fact be told without turning the tombstone into a subscription list (no uncommon practice,) by detailing the various sums he gave during life, or bequeathed at death, for benevolent purposes, and astonishing future generations with the information that he was president of a soup-kitchen, or honorary secretary to a coal-distribution society; if a soldier, where is the necessity to enumerate the number of legs lost and stumps won in the cause of glory? if an author, let no "complete list of the author's works" be furnished; and let not a physician's epitaph become a "quack advertisement," recording wonderful cures he had performed during his life; in short, an epitaph should be brief, and written in language that will appeal to the hearts of all who read it. It should be free from the arrogance that appropriates heaven and eternal happiness, and, on the gravestone, boasts of the possession in words such as these:—"I am with the blessed." It should refer to the hope that stretches beyond the grave, to the uncertainty of life, and the certainty of death, and the tone of it all should teach that

"The glories of our birth and state
Are shadows, not substantial things,"

The more condensed an epitaph is, the better. Pope wrote for Dryden's tomb:—

"This Sheffield raised. The sacred dust below
Was Dryden once. The rest who does not know?"

It was not adopted. How much grander the one word that occupies its place:—

"Dryden."

What an intensity of affection in the simple inscription:—

"Here lies Willie,
Aged 8 months."

The simple notice, "Here lies Willie," would have given scope for wide conjecture, but "aged 8 months" pictures at once the infant sitting on the shore of life suddenly snatched away from the murmur of the sunny wavelets. Our best epitaphs are incorporated with our literature. What need is there of quoting Milton's on Shakspeare, Ben Jonson's on the Countess Dowager of Pembroke, or Garrick's on Hogarth?

Into the subject of epitaphs written by poets for themselves there is little space to enter. That of Thomas Hood is almost perfect,—"He sang the Song of the Shirt." Thomas Campbell wished that "Author of Gertrude of Wyoming" might be recorded on his memorial stone, but his wish was not carried out. Matthew Prior wrote for himself such an epitaph as might have been expected:—

"Nobles and Heralds, by your leave
Here lies what once was Matthew Prior,
The son of A dam and of Ego,
Can Stuart or Nassau claim higher?"

In vivid contrast to this is the self-written epitaph of Robert Burns:—

"The poor inhabitant below
Was quick to learn and wise to know
And keenly felt the friendly glow,
And softer flame;
But thoughtless follies laid him low,
And stain'd his name."

The age of conventional epitaphs is gone, such as "Sickness was my portion, physic was my food," &c., and "Afflictions sore," &c., the age of conventional tombstones, on which were displayed crossbones and grinning skulls and cherubs, that strongly resembled owls and parrots in their general contour, has departed and in the place of the latter we have a conventionality quite as ridiculous, quite as absurd. Who has ever entered a cemetery without being annoyed with the number of quasi broken pillars, torches extinguished, or about to be so, and the ewers and towels and double-handed jugs, that are suggestive of nothing but bedrooms and barber's shops?