Chronicles of the Tombs.

A SELECT

COLLECTION OF EPITAPHS,

PRECEDED BY

AN ESSAY ON EPITAPHS AND OTHER MONUMENTAL INSCRIPTIONS, WITH INCIDENTAL OBSERVATIONS ON SEPULCHRAL ANTIQUITIES.

BY

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"The bell strikes one. We take no note of time
But from its loss. To give it then a tongue,
Is else in man."—Young.

LONDON:

H. G. BOHN, YORK STREET, COVENT GARDEN.

1857.
FUNERAL EMBLEMS

In the churchyard we are accustomed to meet with what have been looked upon as emblems of our mortality - the Cyprus [sic], the Pine, and the Yew. Of these the latter is of the most frequent occurrence, and in some counties of England Yew-trees will be found to have been planted in great numbers: in Somersetshire there is scarcely a churchyard without them, and in many instances they have acquired a considerable magnitude. They are also common in South Wales: in Italy they were planted in rows.

Although several reasons have been assigned for the planting of Yew-trees (generally on the South of the church) in churchyards, they have all failed to give satisfaction. Some have urged that they form a defence to the church against the effects of high winds and storms, for which purpose their thick foliage would seem well adapted; whilst others have looked upon them as offering shelter to those who have come for the performance of their duties at their place of worship. It has been stated that the branches of the Yew-tree have formed substitutes for the Palm used on Palm Sunday, and its wood has been known, in former times, to have been in high request for the making of bows.

Prior to the invention of gunpowder the demand for bows must have been very great, as warlike proceedings were then chiefly carried on by archers. This may, perhaps, account for the great plantation of yews, and the churchyard would not only offer a place of security for their growth, but also probably give a suitable soil, these trees requiring a damp ground or one of clay and loam.

It was an ancient practice for mourners to carry branches of the yew tree in a funeral procession, and to commit them to the grave upon the interment of their relatives or friends. It was believed that branches cut off from their native stock, and thus deposited, would take root and shoot forth again at the returning spring, and they were thus regarded as typical of the resurrection of the body, as well as of the immortality of the soul, represented by their perpetual verdure. The Cypress, on the other hand, was said never to flourish to grow again if once cut, and was, therefore, esteemed significant of dying for ever; it was carried at funerals by the
Romans and other heathen people. Laurel, rosemary, ivy, yew, and cypress were carried at funerals to be deposited in the grave.

It was, and I believe continues to be, the custom of the Scandinavians to strew the path to the grave at funerals with branches of fir and box, and sometimes artificial flowers. Evergreens of all descriptions are employed in Lapland. At Camerton, in Somersetshire, the churchyard is filled with laurels, arbor-vitaes, and roses, and the church is mantled over with ivy and pyrocanthas. Bay leaves are strewed before a corpse in Wales.

The employment of plants and flowers at funerals may be assigned not only to any particular quality or emblem attached to them significant to the occasion, but also as odoriferous and beneficial, and protectives against infection. At the time when the plague prevailed, rosemary, which could usually be obtained at the price of twelve pence an armfull, rose to six shillings a handful. Funeral chaplets have been made of laurel, oak, 1 ivy, 2 passion flower, 3 white lily, 4 palm, 5 olive, myrtle, rosemary, cypress, amaranth. In the Hecuba of Euripides Pine and Cypress are mentioned as denoting death. Ovid alludes to the plantation of Cypress around the tombs. Suetonius and Virgil also refer to the pine betokening death in houses.

Rosemary was not only used at funerals, but was common in various ways at marriages and wedding feasts. Portions of it were presented to the bride, and tied about her person on the nuptial day. It formed also a souvenir for lovers. Among superstitious notions attached to this plant was one held in regard to its power of driving away devils; but it is rather in reference to it as a symbol of remembrance that we must consider it as connected with sepulchral details.

1. Emblematic of virtue and majesty.
2. Of immortality.
3. Of the crucifixion.
4. Of futurity.
5. Of martyrdom.
Bishop Gibson, in his edition of Camden's Britannia (vol.i. p. 183), remarks, that in Surrey, a certain custom was observed time out of mind, of planting rose trees upon the graves, especially by the young men and maidens who have lost their lovers; so that the churchyard of Ockley was full of them. He alludes to the practice having been common with the Greeks and the Romans, as it is often expressed in the codicils to their wills; and according to old inscriptions, one at Ravenna, and another at Milan, roses were ordered to be yearly strewed and planted upon their graves. The urns of the dead were frequently ornamented and bedecked with flowers. Lycurgus limited the Spartans to the use of olive and myrtle.

The employment of flowers, and the cultivation of funereal emblems, led to care of the sacred depository. This has existed throughout all nations. Plato regarded the care of the monuments of their predecessors, and the performance of the funereal rites to their friends, as payments justly due to the dead. The Chinese, and other nations esteemed barbarous, pay visits to the grave, and perform ceremonies to their deceased relatives long after the period of their death. In Ireland funeral ceremonies performed upon a particular day are common. The English are almost the only people who do not pay those reverential and affectionate visits, and who do not generally decorate the grave with flowers, &c. The Welsh practise this amiable duty very generally. It is referred to in the following Epitaph at Longhor churchyard, Glamorganshire:-

The village maidens to her grave shall bring
Selected garlands each returning spring -
Selected sweets - in emblem of the maid
Who underneath this hallow'd turf is laid;
Like her they flourish, beauteous to the eye;
Like her, too soon, they languish, fade, and die.

Another Welsh epitaph formed on the custom of planting flowers on the grave speaks unfavourably as to the enjoyment of connubial bliss:

This spot is the sweetest I've seen in my life,
For it raises my flowers and covers my wife.