

*The Sanctity of the Dead—Dissection.*

131

What a glorious prospect lies before you! That you may prove worthy of the present circumstances is my earnest wish. I repeat I am partial to your country, and hope she will act a noble part to her own and the common advantage.

It is time to finish.—I am not presumptuous enough to suppose that I may be able to produce an impression upon the public. Yet all that I have said in these pages has, besides the merit of impartiality, that of novelty, inasmuch as it is the opinion of a foreigner actuated by no national partialities when speaking of England and France; knowing a little of both countries; honestly and zealously interested in the common happiness; and, if not an impartial judge, at least an accurate and faithful reporter. I am aware I shall be laughed at, if I am honoured with being listened to; but I shall answer the scoffers in the words of the Athenian to the Spartan general—“Strike, but hear!”

With every feeling of regard, I remain,

My dear Sir,

Ever yours truly, &c.

A FOREIGNER.

---

THE SANCTITY OF THE DEAD—DISSECTION.

WHEN the public have fully possessed themselves of a well-conditioned prejudice, it is no easy matter to induce them to part with it. There is something so very consoling in the conscious possession of an idea, no matter whether it be good for any thing or not, and there is so much difficulty in replacing it when lost, that instruction is very generally resented as an injury; and it is sufficient to hint to the many the possibility that they are in error, in order to incur their suspicion and dislike. Perpetual dropping, however, will wear away a stone; and perseverance, after the lapse of a century or so, may do much in persuading mankind to attempt the task of thinking for themselves. Those who have given their time to the up-hill pursuit of attacking prejudices have discovered that nations are not always equally obtuse, but exhibit what may be called fits of easy transmission; during which more way is made for truth at a single effort, than, in a less happy disposition of the public mind, can be cleared in a long series of years. Of these fits, events are great provocatives; and it would not be difficult to show that the weak part of all conservative systems is their inadequacy to control the chapter of accidents.

A luciferous event of this nature is the recent trial of the body-snatchers for murder; and the present moment appears to be one of those “*mollia tempora fandi*,” in which the public will bear a little lecturing on their horrors and extravagancies concerning dissection and the violation of the dead. The ill consequences of the universal and Bœotian darkness which prevails on this subject have, in fact, festered to such a malignity of corruption, as has already excited a very general conviction that “something must be done;” which is the approved formula for that confession of ignorance and helplessness in society, which precedes an effort at thought.

To remedy the evils by which the practice of dissection is surrounded, a mere act of the legislature is not sufficient. Unless the people will consent to study their own interests in anatomy, and

learn to look upon the dead with a reasonable and philosophic eye, no enactment approaching to common sense will be tolerated. The mischiefs arising from an illegal supply of the dissecting-room will continue unabated, science will be imperfectly pursued, and the practices of the body-snatchers, like those of the poachers, will spread a collateral depravity throughout the whole sphere of their contact and influence. It is a humiliating truth in morals, that the occasion makes the thief, and that nothing more is wanting than an adequate temptation to plunge humanity into the most fearful crimes. As long as human subjects shall produce a high price in the market, they will be sought for, no matter at what hazard. Every attempt at impeding the operations of the grave-robber is therefore a direct incentive to murder. The late trials have widely spread abroad the knowledge, that this crime can be committed by means which leave few or no indications of violence behind; and this knowledge is in itself a powerful temptation to the needy and the depraved. Neither is this instruction merely afforded to the body-snatcher, whose operations would in some degree be controlled by the zeal and intelligence of the anatomist he serves: the secret has gone forth for the service of felons of every description,—from the midnight robber to the jealous Othello, or the impatient and legacy-anticipating George Barnwell. Let the human mind become familiarized with these methods of removing troublesome persons from the scene, and natural feelings will oppose but a feeble barrier to the frequency of this worst of crimes; every path of life will be beset with terrors; suspicion will haunt the nightly couch; and the dearest ties of society become merely the grounds for additional distrust. Of the numerous murders which are daily brought to trial, how few would have been discovered if a scientific process of death had been substituted for the throat-cutting and shooting by which they were actually effected! Nor does the evil stop here. As soon as the facility of concealing blood-guiltiness shall become an article of popular knowledge or belief, no man's character will be safe in whose house a sudden death shall occur. It will be sufficient that he profits by the succession—that he is named in the will, to be pointed at as a murderer. Insinuations will be whispered, possibilities tacked together, and calumnies brooded over, against which innocence is no defence, but which will attach through life, and make misery in proportion as the accused is refined, high-minded, and sensitive. After these suggestions, it may appear trifling to insist upon the minor evils which the existing laws occasion, in compelling the rising members of a numerous profession to come into contact with the lowest of their species. But a high-toned morality in the medical practitioner is of no trifling import to the happiness of the species; and that the professional youth should be familiarized with acts unlawful, if not wrong, and habituated to scenes of vulgar debauchery and brutal recklessness, is a consideration which cannot be passed over in contemptuous indifference.

Respecting the utility of dissection, there are few perhaps who have not some vague and general notions. Most persons are aware that the maladies of the living can only be studied at the expense of the dead. The most ignorant old woman, who opens her eyes to the

widest stretch of rotundity at the bare mention of a "notomy," is desirous of being treated with skill when she breaks her collar-bone in a fit of gin or jealousy; and she would be shocked at the very idea of being sent to her grave before her time, because the apothecary could not distinguish between her lungs and her liver: and this is pretty much the extent of information among those who claim to be her intellectual superiors. The education even of the highest classes has been so exclusively busied with Greek particles and fantastical theology, that our best scholars would scarcely know they had a stomach, if not reminded of the fact by an occasional indigestion. The nature and extent of the relation which subsists between anatomy and medical science is a secret confined almost exclusively to the profession. The noble legislators, the patients of St. John Long, give fearful evidence of the profundity of the ignorance of their class, and their miserable unfitness to legislate for the occasion. Here and there a curious inquirer, or what is called a general reader, may indeed see more clearly the sources of a surgeon's knowledge, and appreciate more justly his anatomical labours; but even these look no further. They consider the means of obtaining instruction to be altogether the business of the student; they cherish their own horrors of dissection, call for patent coffins and penal laws, and talk of the respect which is due to the sanctuaries of the dead, as loudly as the most ignorant and imbecile.

One consequence of this prevailing ignorance is the common opinion that anatomy is too closely cultivated. To hear the declaimers on this theme, it might be imagined that the process is one of great amusement and agreeability; and that surgeons and their apprentices addict themselves to a secret indulgence at the public expense, which is untasted by the less luxurious part of mankind. For dissection, as for all other practices, there can be but two sets of motives—the useful and the pleasant; and whatever exceeds the demands of the first must of necessity be referred to the second. Assuredly, if people do dissect for the indulgence of a morbid appetite, their case is not much better than that of the goules and vampires, and they ought to be restrained by pains and penalties from such an unnatural indulgence. But is this the truth? Is there, in the practice of anatomy, any thing so very agreeable that it should be followed for itself alone, and independently of the profitable results which are expected from its culture? Seriously and honestly, I beg to answer in the negative, and to assure my worthy friends, the *profanum vulgus*, both high and low, that there is nothing in a dissecting-room from which the most hardened *habitué* does not retreat at the earliest moment, when he has obtained the information he requires. Practical anatomy, at best, is a loathsome, fatiguing, cold, monotonous, and tiresome piece of business, requiring the strongest excitements of professional zeal for its endurance; and the proof is, that those of the profession who look to it only as a fee-taking process, and care little whether they kill or cure, dissect as little as possible, trusting to books and plates for such scraps of imperfect knowledge as serve to save appearances, and to prevent coarse and cognizable errors. It is only a select few, who, influenced by an awful sense of responsibility, or a lofty ambition of pro-

fessional distinction, bear up against the tedium and disgust of the operation, and continue their dissections after having obtained a licence to practise. It is not from superabundant dissection that the public have any thing to fear, but from the difficulties and embarrassments which impede its due cultivation. Anatomical knowledge, even at the present day, is far less widely diffused, and less extensively pursued, than the interests of physic require. Medicine, though commonly regarded as a conjectural art, and as a sort of metaphysical investigation, is, or ought to be, altogether a science of facts, of which a sound philosophy is the essential basis. There is not a single one of these facts, concerning which ignorance is not a frequent cause of pain, crippling, and death. It is to examinations after death that the whole body of real, positive knowledge concerning disease is attributable. Without it, the physician is a mere conjuror, and as unworthy of credit as any other impostor. For the greater operations of surgery, the most intimate acquaintance with the structure of the body is essential; a mere slip of the knife making all the difference between life and death. For preserving this knowledge, when thoroughly acquired,—if, indeed, such could ever be the case,—a frequent revision is strictly necessary; and, to maintain practical dexterity, operations must frequently be repeated on the dead subject, by every surgeon who does not practise in the hospitals of a great city, where accidents are frequent and diseases common. It is a gross error, however, to imagine that anatomy is of less importance in the ordinary every-day business of surgery than in the more striking operations. Even in the commonest of its processes—the drawing blood from the arm, fatal and horrible consequences may, and do, arise from anatomical ignorance, and a confidence in routine dexterity. If, then, the practice of anatomy were as open and unimpeded as the operations of the dancing-school, the art would not be cultivated as it should be. How can it, therefore, be supposed that superfluous dissection occurs, when, in addition to the physical loathsomeness, are accumulated the moral disgusts of legal impediment, and the enormous expenditure of money caused by the dangers and difficulties in procuring subjects? If the enemies of dissection will but take the pains to reflect on these things, they may at length perhaps discover that the surgeon does not stand precisely in the immoral and reprobate condition of men doing illegal acts for their own private profit and gratification; and that he does not exactly deserve to be pumped on like a pickpocket, or pelted with rotten eggs like a regrater and monopolist.

In the present state of public opinion, the application of a due remedy for this evil by legislative means is a matter of great delicacy and difficulty. To superstitious prejudice there is no effectual opponent except knowledge. But knowledge is of slow development; and it must itself become habitual, before it can obliterate the most trivial and fantastic absurdity of the nursery. Many a philosopher, to whom the beatitude of "*rerum cognoscere causas*" may be largely attributed, carries to his grave the fears of darkness and its imaginary concomitants, derived in his infancy. The associations of the passions with particular ideas are the least easily subjected to reason; they operate mechanically, instinctively, and



without the obvious intervention of any train of thought. This is very nearly the state of mind with the most free-thinking persons on the subject of the dead. Reason, indeed, tells them that the body, when deprived of life, is insensible to pain or insult—that it is a mere mass of inanimate clay—that it has lost all moral identity with the beloved person whom it represents—and that, consequently, the ideas of exposure, indecency, and disrespect, usually attached to the business of dissection, are no more applicable to the dead subject, than to a pictured representation of a departed friend. This, indeed, they know; but they do not feel it. Long habit has associated, with the visible form of the deceased, deep emotions of love, veneration, or regard; and these emotions arise unbidden, and fill the bosom with an irrepressible sentiment of horror at the idea of outrage committed on the body so circumstanced. It is said that this respect for the dead is a natural feeling; and so indeed it is,—natural to the ignorance in which social man is still preserved. We ridicule the imbecile devotee who converted the inexpressibles of a saint into an object of adoration; but the current idolatry of a corpse is not a whit less superstitious, or less founded in erroneous notions of its state and relations. Strange, too, that the Christian, who places his identity in a spiritual soul, and regards the mortal spoil as a mere discarded vestment, should be most infected with this weakness; while the Epicurean, to whom the body is all, is for the most part free from it! Something also depends upon a religious feeling. The notion of consecrated ground has been made a source of profit to the Church, and it is guarded with all the jealousy of a vested right. The Catholics, more especially, consider the resting in unblest or holy earth as by no means indifferent to the condition of the soul. The practice of exhumation, rendered necessary by the unprovided wants of the surgeon, jars too harshly with this idea for toleration; and the vague and unintelligible, but not less formidable, epithet of “sacrilegious” has added fresh atrocity to the imputed criminality of the dissector. To such notions, however, the anatomist must bow. It is too much for any man to condemn of sovereign authority the religious opinions of his neighbour, or to violate a prejudice because it seems ridiculous. On the contrary, it would be good policy in every anatomical teacher to procure consecrated ground for the reception of the subject when he has done with it. Such a deference to opinion would materially loosen the existing apprehensions and hostility of the people. If anatomy should by legal enactment be rendered, as it ought, an open and lawful pursuit, arrangements might readily be made to dissect first, and bury afterwards; and no irreverent disregard to religion would then be suspected or feared in the process.

Against an opinion thus inveterate, time alone can operate; but the necessity for some law that will conciliate the wants of the anatomist with the general safety is immediate. Any regulations directly thwarting popular prejudice would totally fail in practice. Opinion is more mighty than law, and its strongholds are not so to be forced. The rich would evade the law, and the poor would be strengthened in their abhorrence of dissection by finding it thus visited upon them as a consequence of their destitution. On the

contrary, direct legislation against the body-snatcher, or attempt at throwing impediments in the way of anatomy, is too absurd even for the excited fanaticism of the existing moment. Every one knows that anatomy must continue; that it is as impossible, as it would be absurd, to suppress it; and while bodies continue in demand, repressive legislation will but increase the hazards of the trade, and, by raising the prices in the market, increase the temptations to murder, which it is the business of the legislature to remove. It is by legalizing the operation, and opening fresh facilities for the lawful obtainment of bodies, that the requisite security is alone to be sought. The desired law, then, must be a temporizing and modified enactment, and rather calculated to undermine the existing prejudices, and to open facilities, than to force them. Its general basis should be, the giving the citizen a property in his own body, and conferring a legal right to demise it for dissection, notwithstanding any opposition of surviving friends. At present, the demise of the body is not obligatory on the executor, since the non-burial of a corpse after a certain time is a misdemeanour at law. If the law on this point were changed, the poor and the profligate might alone, at first, avail themselves of the permission; yet gradually the public would accustom themselves to the idea; shame would cease to attach to the practice; and, if a subsequent decent burial were made a peremptory obligation in the transfer, there would in time be afforded a larger supply of subjects than the utmost wants of the profession would demand. To facilitate the voluntary proffer of subjects, it is of much importance that the legislature itself should attach no disgrace to dissection. The consignment of the corpses of murderers to the surgeon's knife keeps alive all the vague terrors attached to the operation, and is perhaps one of the most efficient of the existing impediments to the business of dissection. On the same principle is it most desirable that the law should not make dissection a punishment of poverty, by forcibly transferring the poor-house or hospital corpses to the anatomist. It does, at first sight, seem reasonable that he who has received the last attentions in disease at the public expense should make some return to society by this surrender of his body. But the argument is more specious than real; and, what is worse, by making a different law for the poor and for the rich it would foster existing prejudices, and do more harm than service to anatomy. It has been suggested that all unclaimed bodies should be abandoned to the dissector; and against this practice the same objection would not hold. The feelings of the survivors would not be hurt, and the usage would not touch individuals closely enough to excite a morbid attention in the public mind to the subject. To a limited degree such an enactment would be serviceable, though it would not suffice for the demands of science. After all that can be done by law, some body-snatching will still remain to be tolerated; and wisdom should lead the authorities to avoid every possible occasion for dragging the practice into evidence. The only effectual means, however, of reconciling the public to dissection would be the dissemination of physiological knowledge among the people; a circumstance in itself desirable for manifold reasons. It would be well worth the while of the metropolitan teachers of anatomy to give a

short gratuitous outline course, of some ten or twelve lectures every session, to the members of Mechanics' Institutions and to decent operatives. Their beautiful collections of preparations should also be freely offered to public inspection; when a well-insinuated contrast between this embalming of the deceased, and the horrors of the tomb, the worm, the beetle, and the rat, would go far in reconciling the spectator to the practice. It is the strangeness of these ideas that makes them formidable, more than any real terror that properly belongs to them. The influence of the upper and educated classes might profitably be brought to bear against the prejudice. The medical profession might and ought to contribute their example. Dr. Macartney, Professor of Anatomy at Trinity College, Dublin, has procured the signatures of some hundreds of enlightened individuals to a deed of gift of their bodies; and he pays a commendable attention to freeing his dissecting-schools from as much of the disgusts, dirt, and factitious terrors, as possible; an attention which should be universal with teachers. Great good likewise might be effected by a judicious and plain statement of the case laid before the public by the Useful Knowledge Society. The incidental benefits of such instruction would extend even beyond the immediate object in view. But it is useless to pursue the matter further: enough has been said to indicate the spirit in which any new law on anatomy should be conceived, and to point out the way in which opinion should be attacked by those who profess to lead it, in order to bring the minds of Englishmen to a sounder and more rational view of their own interests in the question. M.

---

**SECRET LOVE.**

“ O BREATHE not the name,” nor awaken the thought,  
That absence in vain to forgetfulness dooms;  
More ardently Love, with calamity fraught,  
In secret the heart's dreary cavern illumines.

But it lets not the worldlings discover the spark,  
So jealous lest coldness should deaden the flame;  
As when clouds interpose—the horizon is dark,  
While the radiance beyond is for ever the same.

By constancy nourish'd, it struggles through tears,  
Till the rainbow of Hope in the distance is seen;  
Then Love's vivid light, long obscured by its fears,  
Bursts forth a bright Sun, in its glory serene.

U.