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DOUGHT WE TO BE CREMATED?

A CHAT WITH SIR HENRY THOMPSON.

THE head and front of the cremation movement in this country is the distinguished surgeon, Sir Henry Thompson. In 1874, by an article in the *Contemporary Review*, advocating this method of disposing of the dead he pulled a hornet's nest about his ears. This surprised him a bit, as he was conscious of having done no wrong. Eight hundred letters—some friendly, many objecting—were shot by the perspiring postman into his letter-box; and of these, his secretary found only a very small proportion requiring answers from himself.

Three months from the appearance of that article there was formed the Cremation Society of England. Sir Henry was elected president, and this position he has held ever since. Among his duties is the deciding, in every case, whether or not a body sent to the Society to be disposed of shall be cremated. Let it be further added, before introducing Sir Henry to speak for himself, that the process of cremation only is conducted at Woking; that, at this date, 522 bodies have been cremated there—among the latest being those of Mr Edmund Yates and Sir Austen Henry Layard; and that the only other crematorium in this country is at Manchester, where sixty-two bodies have been cremated. The business of the society is conducted chiefly at the London office, No. 8, New Cavendish street, Portman Place; and the Honorary Secretary, who for several years has devoted much valuable time to the Society's interests, and regulates with care all the financial and practical work, is Mr. J. C. Swinburne-Hanham.

'Now,' in his rapid and precise way, continued Sir Henry, whose preliminary observations to a *Cassell's Saturday Journal* representative are summarised above, 'as it is incidents in connection with cremation you are in quest of, we had better stay where we are, for it is here, if anywhere, that they occur; at Woking you could only see the very perfect system adopted in the operation of reducing the body to ashes. The shell containing the body, which is not touched or exposed in the process, slides instantly into the cremation chamber, and, the door closing, leaves nothing visible externally.

'In an hour and a half, or two hours—according to the size of the body—the operation is completed without escape of smoke or offensive odours, from the perfect combustion ensured. The simple gases which issue from the chimneys are invisible, and are at once absorbed by the trees, the crops, and the flowers, which live and grow on all the products of animal life, thus purifying the air for man's use. Afterwards, the ashes are easily collected to be placed in an urn for preservation. All these details follow like clockwork, and anything in the nature of incident, if it were possible, would be out of place.

'To understand and appreciate the one or two little matters I am going to tell you, you must get rid of the common notion that we are unduly anxious to obtain bodies to cremate. All we desire is to convert people to an intelligent belief that cremation is better than burial. So far are we from being solely anxious for bodies that we not infrequently decline to cremate bodies sent to us for that purpose, unless certain conditions are complied with.

'Some years ago the body of an English marquis, for instance, arrived at Woking to be cremated. It had come from Paris, and no notice of its coming had been received. Medical certificates accompanied it, which would doubtless have insured the prompt burial of the body, but we declined to proceed until it had been examined by an expert, and every possible suspicion of the death having occurred from foul play been removed.

'I have in my drawer here the papers of a recent case where circumstances compelled me to decline unless a proper investigation of the cause of death were made. That was after there had been a coroner's inquest on the body, too. It came to us with the coroner's certificate, attributing death to 'syncope,' and the reason the coroner had set upon it was that it was a sudden death. The man was found dead in bed in the morning, having been apparently well the night before.

'But in this case there was absolutely no evidence whatever as to the cause of death; no medical attendant had seen him for years. It was quite impossible to accept a statement that the death was due to any condition of the heart, nor could a coroner declare, even with the help of twelve honest jurors, that the deceased had not been the victim of poison by his own hand or by that of another!

'The only fact of which they might be certain was, that the man was dead; and yet they made the definite statement in writing above mentioned. I required, in consequence, an autopsy; the true cause—a natural one—was

found, and the cremation took place. A certificate was thus acquired in the place of a most uncomfortable doubt.

'Of course, we have no power to enforce *post mortem* examination; and if the representatives of the deceased object, and we think there ought to be one, we advise them to have the body buried and refuse to cremate it. This shows how erroneous is the popular notion, that we are eager to force cremation on people. We should like the method to be made subject to State regulation; although it is not illegal now. The only thing we desire to see universally enforced are the safe-guards we adopt to discover the occurrence of deaths from foul play.

'I don't know whether you are aware of it, but the ordinary certificates upon which bodies are buried in this country, while in many instances containing all that is necessary, do not furnish the particulars most wanted in other cases where perhaps they are most needed. In rare cases bodies have been buried under false names by design. Identification of the deceased is not required; in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred it is known beyond question. But it should be determined and stated in every case by the medical man who signs.

'There is a well-known illustration, among many others, of a schoolboy who died suddenly—from heart disease, it was certified. Rumours of ill-treatment got about; the body was exhumed, unclothed, and found covered with bruises. A severe flogging proved to have been an exciting cause of the catastrophe. Under a proper system the body must be viewed by the examining doctor. In Paris, for example, where the inquiry is very strict in every case of death, and is made by a special medical officer for the purpose, this is invariably done. Either there, or by the system employed by our Society, the injury would have been discovered at once, and not left to the very slender chance of an early exhumation. For in the grave such traces of ill-treatment soon disappear.

'Well, we, of course, cannot rely on the ordinary certificates, but use a brief schedule of questions, carefully drawn up, which afford important information not obtainable by the others, and the full bearing of which is more than I can tell you in the time at our disposal—and Sir Henry looked suggestively at his watch. 'We also require two doctors to certify independently, instead of one, and even then circumstances arise in two or three cases in every hundred sent us, where we ask for a *post mortem*, or decline to cremate.

'And now I must say good-bye! Come and see me any morning at half-past nine.'



Front, photo, Dundee.

DUNEDIN HOSPITAL STAFF.

FRONT ROW.—Probationers BRACKENSALE, HARRIS and MATHEWSON. Junior Nurses BAGLEY and CURRICH. Probationer BARCLAY. Junior Nurse DRABBLE. Probationer STRONACH.
 SECOND ROW.—Probationer LOWER. Charge Nurse McANDREW. Night Superintendent JAMES. Charge Nurse WILLIAMSON. Miss FRASER (Matron). Charge Nurses VETICH, WILLIAMS and ELDER. Junior Nurse ALLAN.
 THIRD ROW.—Probationer GARDEN. Wardman REID. DR. McADAM (Senior House Surgeon). P. MILLAR, Esq. (Chairman of Trustees). A. BURNES (Sec). W. McINNES (Dispenser).
 DR. ROSS (Junior House Surgeon). Wardman SHEPHERD. Probationer MATHEWSON.
 DR. ROSS (Junior House Surgeon). Wardman SHEPHERD. Probationer MATHEWSON. Junior Nurses SHERIDAN, LITTLE and DERRY.