

MARCH.—THE SUBURBAN CEMETERIES.



It is a common reproach brought against us by our Continental neighbours that in our national character we are eminently wanting both in sentiment and veneration. They assert that this deficiency in our organisation is strikingly apparent in the slight esteem in which we are apt to hold dignities in general, unless accompanied by certain very tangible advantages. They accuse us of possessing little reverence for *la gloire*, national or individual, and declare that even in our domestic relations, on which we are apt to pride ourselves rather highly, the absence of sentiment is strikingly discernible, inasmuch as the anniversaries of our birthdays are often passed by without honour; in short, that we have scarcely a fête-day observance among us. Nor do our shortcomings terminate here. They aver that they extend even to those whom we have most loved and cherished in life, when departed from us, and the place that knew them knoweth them no more: that we are content to put them out of our sight; and are accustomed to say in our hearts—They have departed, and be their memory forgotten from amongst us.

Whether this accusation be true or not, certain it is that our own beautiful suburban Cemeteries can boast few visitors in comparison with the numbers always seen in similar places abroad. Though each side of the metropolis can now boast of its own "God's acre" (as our pious forefathers were wont to characterise their last resting-places), all of which present in their several ways features of attractions peculiar to themselves. Located for the most part on elevated sites, commanding extensive views of the country around, surrounded by a wildness of shrubbery, not alone of "melancholy yews," but of every flowering shrub that bears our chilly climate, it does seem singular that they should be so little frequented; their broad gravel-walks and smooth greensward, offering, as it would appear, so many inducements to a lengthened and meditative stroll, particularly to persons generally so sober-minded as ourselves.

The Cemetery of Abney Park, at the eastern end of London, was once the stately pleasure of an old English mansion, well known to the antiquary of the last generation. It spreads its broad acres much as in days of yore, offering to the eye the same pastoral valleys lying at its feet, whilst in the distance the wooded heights of Totteridge and Edmonton (both Upper and Lower) seem to form a natural framework to the landscape. Here, where the rustic squire and stately dame once promenade in all the pride of buckram and brocade, are paths not less picturesque, lawns not less verdant, whilst the same bright sun shines over all. The "yew-tree bower" is still in existence, though little frequented. Now and then a stray wayfarer may turn his head as he passes its iron gate, pause a moment to glance down its beautiful vista, and then, with accelerated footstep, hurry on to fulfil the duties or pleasures of the day.

The Northern Cemetery that crowns the hill of Highgate boasts its own individual features. Shut in by its belt of trees, its landscape is far less attractive than that of its neighbour. True, it looks down on the giant city at its feet, from whose toiling multitude its harvest for eternity is to be reaped. The sound of its cathedral bell, whose smoke-clad dome is visible in the distance, from time to time booms on the ear, wafted by the summer wind. The hum of the distant city, audible in the still evening, strikes on the heart, and is felt rather than heard, to mingle with the surrounding calm. Here rest in their last-long sleep not a few of those Merchant Princes, mighty in this world's goods, the wonder and envy of so many; and here, reposing beneath his modest tomb, and still more modest epitaph, lies the great good man, to whom his own country has so barely done justice—Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Strangers from the east and from the west have sought his grave, and blessed God, beside it, for the lessons of wisdom and knowledge which his meek spirit has left behind him, to strengthen in the battle of life those that shall come after him.

Less picturesque in situation than the northern and eastern grave-yards—the western Cemetery of Old Brompton—closely resembling a town garden of unusual extent—ripens in the close proximity of bustling life, and bids fair, with the neighbourhood springing up around it, soon to lose its character as a suburban sepulchre. Nothing that is wild, and little that is picturesque, attaches to its beauty. It flourishes like a well-kept pleasure-ground. No inequality of surface deceives the eye, as to its magnitude; no winding walks add artificial length to its space. Everything belonging to it is precise and geometrical. Now and then a few single graves lie apart. But the exceptions are rare. In long straight lines the dead repose in silent neighbourhood—a brief space now and then intervening; vacant spots secured by the providence of the living to ensure a resting-place for themselves beside those they have lost in life, when time to them shall be no more. Family gatherings are these worthy the Hebrew epitaph—"They were lovely and pleasant in their lives, and in their death they were not divided."

Two peculiarities will strike the mind of the visitor to this enclosure—namely, the vast numbers of military men who appear to have chosen this as their last retreat—veterans of names well known in the wars of the last and present century—and who probably sought, in their old age, and found, in the medical staff attached to the College at Chelsea, that relief which is hardly to be met with to the same extent elsewhere. These, and the graves of women in the first bloom of existence may almost be said to abound. Here—gathered from far and near, as their stones record—lie a sisterhood of sorrow, who had sought, in the mild air of Brompton, relief from that scourge of the fair and young, consumption. It is impossible to look on such graves unmoved, or to read the ages of the victims without a sigh. What stories of hopes and fears does a sight of these little hillocks suggest to the mind, from the first insidious approach of disease to its final triumph: stealthily, yet like an armed man, sapping the very springs of life, whilst adding fresh beauty to the form. Who is there among us so happy as to be ignorant of its detail—of the brightened eye, of the blooming cheek, of the slight cough, working deeper day by day—often smothered, but never quite suppressed, to cheat the ear of some anxious listener? Who has not sighed over the delusive hope of recovery (almost more touching than despair), which forms so strong a feature of the disease? Who has not witnessed the patient endurance of some meek sufferer—the unceasing watchfulness of some untiring friend? True heroism, active and passive, and worthy an enduring record, if we were not accustomed to estimate heroism rather by the splendour than the merit of actions:

So let their graves with spring's first flowers be drest,
And the green turf lie lightly on their breast.

But whatever claims to notice and admiration the modern Golgothas above enumerated may present, the pre-eminence still remains with the one that was first opened among us—the north-western, at Kensal-green, or, as it is more familiarly designated, the Harrow-road Cemetery. At once the most extensive and most picturesque, it must be admitted by all to do full justice to the care and attention bestowed upon it, and to fulfil the liberal promises made to the public on its behalf. Located actually in the country, with only fair skies and green meadows around it a few years ago, and still open on every side to the pure breeze and blessed light of heaven, symptoms of the approach of busy life is seen even here. But enter within the gates, and how holy a calm seems to fall upon the spirit!

A place where all things mournful meet;
And yet the sweetest of the sweet,
The stillest of the still.—WILSON.

All that presents itself in nature is beautiful; all that is unsightly of mortality is hid away. Its entrance, between bosquets of bright flowers and blooming shrubs, leads to pathways in every direction; and, turn we to the right or to the left, only images of repose meet the eye. Monuments of various styles mark the last homes of every grade of society, save that of the very poorest; nor can we take a step, or cast a glance anywhere, without something of interest rewarding the search. How many of the tenants of the grandest mausoleums erected here were familiar to us all—in their name, fame, and individuality? and from what various walks of life have they been gathered together, to fill up the high places of this solemn congregation?

Many monuments of a strictly architectural character, full of ornament, and wearing something of the appearance of miniature cathedrals, vary the scene, as well as others of a mediæval cast. It is, perhaps, not unworthy of remark, that the latter seems to be expressly chosen for the graves of those connected with the legal and clerical professions; whilst the few graves already tenanted by architects and sculptors of renown, as those of Smirke and of Bacon, are remarkable for their puritan-plainness of design—a block of un-hewn stone sufficing for the monuments of those who have left (in their works) so many more enduring monuments behind them. Every variety of funeral urn that the ingenuity of man could devise seem congregated here—from those of "hoar antiquity" to many, fashioned by the fancy of modern taste. Some figure as principals, some as mere decorative accessories: all are more or less beautiful, and can never be out of keeping—time having consecrated its beautiful form to the very genius of Death and Mortality.

It is not, however, the most pretentious structures that present the chief interest to the thoughtful visitor. Every now and then we come upon some spot bearing a device or record of peculiar and individual taste, suggestive of speculations that cannot be solved; but which are not the less absorbing on that account. How many stones are to be seen, bearing a Christian name only—Marie, Blanche, Millicent. What were the histories of persons so designated? we enquire. To whom did they belong in life? by whom are they lamented in death?

One nameless tomb of dove-coloured marble bears on its face two delicately-sculptured hands, clasped together not as in prayer but in greeting—probably a faithful representation of the last grasp exchanged between the living and the dead. Another grave-stone presents, in the form of a gigantic hour-glass, an enduring *tempus fugit*—a perpetual reminder of the flight of time to every passer-by. A lyre surmounting a pillar of some magnitude, would seem to indicate the grave of a poet—a native of the sister kingdom, as we learn from the inscription—and probably less known than he deserves to be.

Memorial pillars, pyramids, and crosses of every variety abound. Graves wrap in circular stone, emulative of those of our Saxon ancestors; altar-like tombs, and broken columns are, excepting the common head-stone, perhaps the most numerous.

But we must not pass without a word those garden-like graves that present so fair a feature of the scene, and which are indebted to nature alone for their embellishment. And see how large an amount of adornment six feet of earth may be made to exhibit. On some the aim would seem to be to show "the seasons and their change," in successive flowers; on others, the perennial cypress alone appears. On one grave four shrubs of this kind have expanded into a living pyramid, excluding the very light of day from the tomb they were intended to decorate. Another grave—the most poetical of all (it might have been that of Lycidas himself)—so completely are earth and stone shrouded by "ivy never sere," not in straggling clusters, but bearing witness in its wild luxuriance that the careful hand of taste has been busy in its twinnings. May the memory of the departed be ever green as his grave! On the graves of children it is observable that such flowers for the most part are selected as fancy has chosen, from their pure whiteness, emblematical of innocence—the snowdrop, the narcissus, the daisy: one little grave is literally enveloped by "the weep-tipped flower." The white rose flourishes abundantly everywhere; sometimes presenting itself, in high culture, sometimes in briar-like luxuriance—but always in beauty. It would seem to have attached itself peculiarly to the soil, for even in December it may be seen putting forth buds, never destined, however, to expand into flowers.

If these brief reminiscences of a few hours passed among the tombs should be of interest to any reader, let him visit the scenes we have attempted to describe, and thus help to wipe away the handwriting of accusation so generally existing against us, that our sympathy with the departed is reserved for those of foreign nations alone.