

Peculiar Furniture.

BY JAMES SCOTT.

IN the capacity of designer of furniture novelties for the trade and for technical journals, I have frequently met with particulars and drawings of curious articles of what may be called "practical joke furniture," and have sometimes seen the actual goods. I have been interested in making a collection of the details of these curious chairs, tables, beds, etc., and, under the impression that the description of some of them may prove acceptable reading, have made a selection from my portfolio. The explanations of the mechanical portions of the articles will be found sufficiently exhaustive to assist any reader, who may so aspire, to make any of the goods.

The chair illustrated in Fig. 1 would appear harmless enough to the person intending to

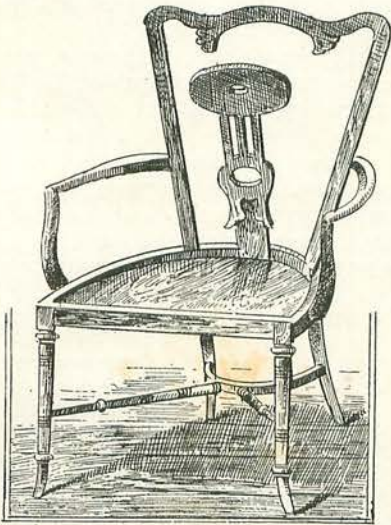
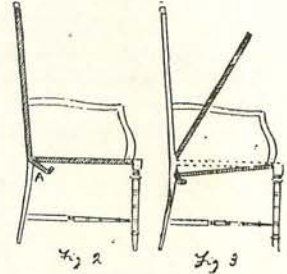


FIG. 1. A CHAIR TO STRIKE A SITTER'S HEAD.

accept the comfort apparently offered by it, but upon taking a seat that person would experience a decidedly sharp smack upon the back of his head. Naturally, he would instinctively and quickly rise, only to discover the chair in its normal condition, no sign of weakness of any part being observable. The drawing illustrates the chair in its tormenting attitude—as it would appear supposing a person were seated upon it. A side view of the chair, supposed to be cut exactly in half, is shown in Fig. 2.

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The immediate effect of a person's weight upon the seat is to cause the back edge of it to subside, and press upon the lower and hidden end (A) of a banister, or upright middle piece, the direct result being that the extreme upper end of this banister is projected violently forward, as in Fig. 3; striking the person's head before he has had the opportunity of avoiding the blow. The seat is hinged in front



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to the framing of the chair, as also is the banister. A spring, somewhat resembling the pattern of those fitted behind shop doors, is attached to the under-side of the seat, and this spring forces the seat to regain its original elevation instantaneously upon the release of the pressure previously exerted above it. In like manner, the action of a small spring situated between the banister and the seat-frame results in the return of the banister to its normal position. One can imagine the surprise of a person unfortunate enough to receive a shock from the

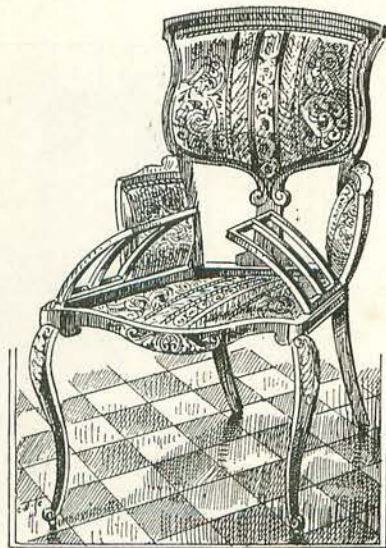


FIG. 4. A CHAIR TO IMPRISON A PERSON.

innocent-looking banister. The top of this banister, under ordinary circumstances, comes into direct contact with the under edge of the chair top.

A chair possessing less obnoxious capabilities is that drawn in Fig. 4, yet it is one equally likely to create surprise on the occupant's part. The weight of the sitter depresses the seat bodily for an inch or so, acting on levers adjoined to the bottom end of a portion of each arm, the immediate result being that the front halves of the arms arch over the sitter's legs, thereby imprisoning him, and rendering movement of the

legs a difficult matter. To add to the effectiveness of this article, contrivances are fitted in the back and front framework of the seat, which throw out a pair of catches as soon as the seat sinks, fully serving to prevent the return of the seat and arms to their normal position

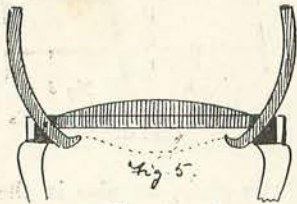


Fig. 5.

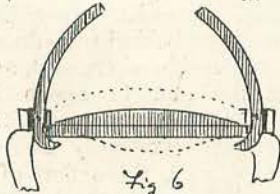


Fig. 6.

A CHAIR TO IMPRISON A PERSON.

until the catches have been pushed into the woodwork again. A man could thus be held a prisoner for a lengthy time. Fig. 5 shows the arms up; Fig. 6, down, as in Fig. 4.

A third and rather atrocious description of article is seen in Fig. 8. The front portion of the seat subsides beneath the sitter, transferring him instantly to the carpet. The distance of the drop, and the velocity of its accomplishment, are both calculated to produce bruises or broken bones. Two catches—one at each side—may be used in order

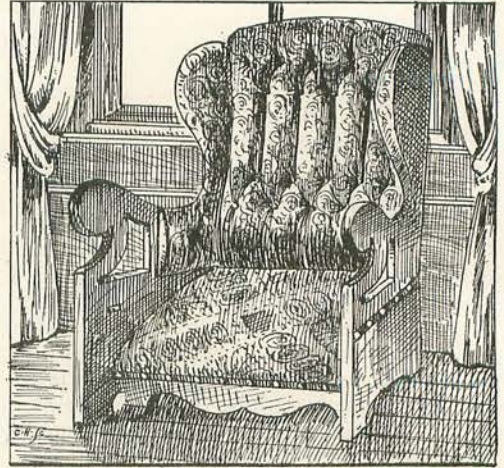


FIG. 8. A CHAIR WITH SLIP-DOWN SEAT.

to maintain the seat in a rigid, horizontal position when so required. A "shop-door" spring is likewise fitted to the under-side of the seat, which immediately returns to its ordinary level when the person has slipped off it.

A chair, the ultimate purpose of which is somewhat analogous to that of the article illustrated by Fig. 4, yet different in its action, is shown in Figs. 9 and 10. The first drawing provides a view of it in its normal state. Upon taking a seat nothing unusual is experienced; but immediately the occupant leans against the back, that back gives way to the extent of a few inches at the top, thereby forcing the arms round the body of the sitter, after the manner to be seen by

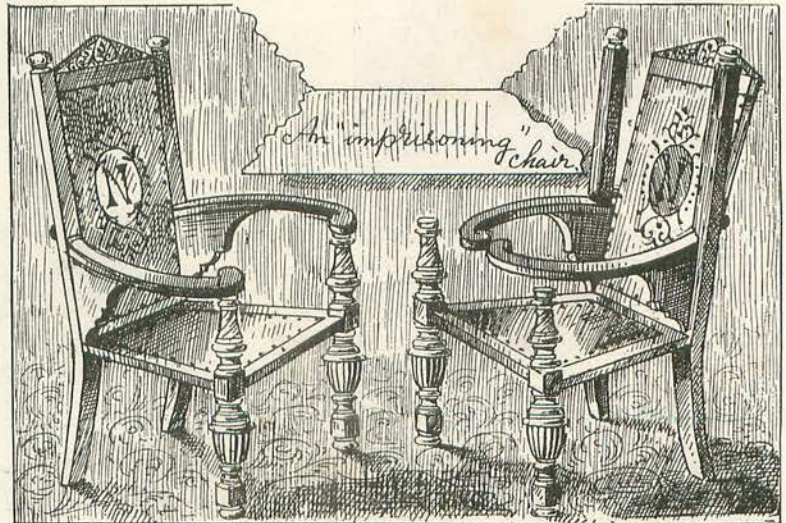


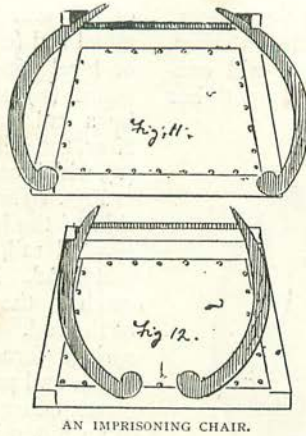
FIG. 9.

FIG. 10.

a reference to Fig. 10. The motions producing these results are explained as follows: Each arm is hinged, as in the plan Fig. 11, to the inner side of a back upright. The back is hinged to the seat, but is prevented from falling too far by means of a curved back rail joined to the uprights.

When pressure is exerted on the back, the curved end of the arms—those parts behind the chair—are pushed, thus causing the arms to swing round as shown in plan Fig. 12. A person could, in this manner, be held a temporary prisoner for a period depending upon the discretion of the owner of the chair.

Turning aside from peculiar chairs, I will introduce a very innocent-looking article in the shape of a piano-stool. Fig. 13 gives its usual appearance. Receiving an invitation to amuse the company with a tune on the piano, the pianist would proceed to the instrument, where it would be explained to him that the top of the stool was incapable of rising, but "would he just try the height, to ascertain whether it were suitable?" Dumping down on it, the pianist would momentarily be struck with the impression that an earthquake had taken place, for the seat would depress beneath his weight, until it reached the elevation depicted in



It would be difficult, I fear, to find the man who would not strenuously resent such despicable treatment, especially if the practical joke were imposed upon him whilst in the midst of a gathering of festive people.

The contrivance permitting this action on the part of the seat is of the simplest kind. Each turned leg consists of two pieces—a hollow lower portion, into which fits a cylindrical upper piston. A strong spiral spring is inserted within each hollow, beneath the end of each upper piece, and these springs force the seat back to its original height when the pressure of the body is taken away. There are grooves partially along the upper pistons, into which fit small pegs attached to the tops of the lower portions of the legs, and these prevent the seat from being forced entirely out of place.

My descriptive remarks now reach what must be regarded as an hypocritical table. Everyone, no doubt, is acquainted with the assertions of mesmerists respecting the possibility of the strong influence of mind, acting through the medium of hands placed on a table, raising the table to a height of a few inches. I will not attempt to criticise this declaration, for the mind, I am aware, is capable of such

development as to produce wonders in the way of its power over inanimate matter; but here is the explanation of the way in which trickery may be, and often is, introduced into these experiments.

Two or four persons may sit at the table illustrated in Fig. 15, one of the number being, of course, the owner of the article, who is acquainted with the details and object of its construction. Hands are placed, in pairs, upon the top of the table, and the persons are requested to

concentrate their attention upon the matter of endeavouring to raise it by the aid of will-power alone, their gaze to be meanwhile fixed steadfastly at the centre of the table-top.

After remaining in this posture for a few

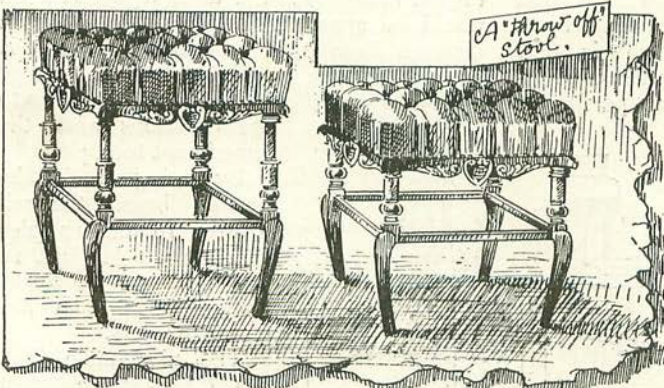


FIG. 13.

FIG. 14.

Fig. 14. Most assuredly the effect of this subsidence would be to hurl him to the floor, to be eventually confronted upon his rising with the stool apparently unaltered in form or size.

moments, they will feel the table pressing upward, apparently acceding to their desires. It will seem rather unsteady, but will continue to rise until a certain height has



A RAISABLE TABLE.

been attained, when it will slowly sink, and assume its normal position. Should one of the experimenters become inquisitive during the uprising of the table, and glance at the legs of the article, he will perceive that the extremities of them are actually off the floor, and will naturally be astonished at the progress of events.

Other tables may, perhaps, be tried; but for some reason or another, so the host will explain, they will not rise. They may be too heavy, or the impulse of the operators may be weakened after experimenting with this table. The visitors will little dream that they have been effectually deceived by a most simple contrivance, which is now exposed to the reader. The vase of evergreens is a fixture. Its upper portion is devoted to the purpose evidenced by the existence of the plant; but its lower half contains the means of deceit.

Fig. 16 will assist the reader to understand the arrangement adopted in order to secure the results described. A is a division in the vase, supporting the mould and plant. B is a movable division, travelling, when required, up and down a cylindrical space within the vase. Between the fixed and movable divisions is placed a series of strong spiral springs. From the bottom

of the movable division proceeds a very thin metal rod (c), its lower extremity being flush or level with the under-side of the bottom board (D) of the table, where it is covered by a rail (E) pivoted on this same side. Now, the rail just mentioned has a projection (F), which can be easily touched by the foot.

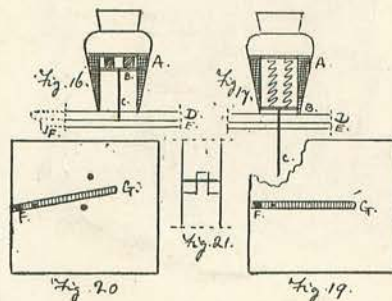
Figs. 19 and 20 provide plans of the under-side of the bottom board. G represents the pivoted rail, which covers the end of the metal rod. Upon applying the foot to the catch F, the rail will turn, exposing the end of the rod. When this has been done, the springs force the movable division downwards and push the rod against the floor, the consequence being that the table is impelled in an upward direction. Of course, it would topple over were it not for the persons' hands, which steady it. The liability to unsteadiness is calculated to impress the visitors to a greater extent than a steadily rising table would be likely to.

The rod is composed of two portions, pivoted as in Fig. 21, and when this part emerges beneath the bottom board of the table, manœuvring on the part of the owner will result in the table moving bodily in a side direction, causing the rod to bend at the joint, when a small spring, which is permanently inserted in that joint, completes the trick by forcing the rod into contact with the under-side of the board, where it is then entirely out of sight. By this time the table will have resumed its normal position. The size of the bottom board prevents any of the operators seeing the rod, should they happen to peer curiously at the table legs. The rod would be apparent to anyone sitting at a distance from it, in the same way as it is apparent in the drawing; but, of course, the owner would exercise his discretion as to

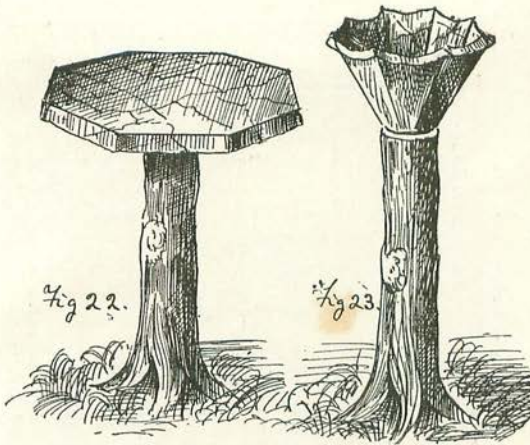
the occasions when the experiment took place.

By using a double-bottom board, the rail E, Figs. 16 and 17 (also shown as G in Figs. 19 and 20), may be effectively hidden from too-curious visitors.

The next table (Fig. 22) differs to a great extent from the foregoing. It is a garden-table; apparently a tree-stump surmounted by a marble-cloth covered board. One can imagine the consternation experienced by a visitor invited to sit in a summer arbour with

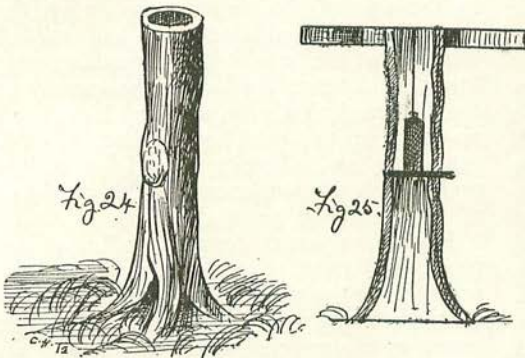


A RAISABLE TABLE.



A DISAPPEARING TABLE.

his host, adjacent to one of these tables, when he found, after having had his attention diverted for a moment, that the solid-looking top had disappeared. He would feel in a ridiculous position, sitting facing his com-



A DISAPPEARING TABLE.

panion, with an ordinary bare tree-stump standing between them. He might eventually discover that the top had gone a journey down into the hollow interior of the stump; but notwithstanding the simplicity of the method by which such a result had been accomplished, he would, doubtless, be at a loss to account for the disappearance.

The shape of the table is octagonal, and the appearance of the hanging edge gives one the impression that the table-top is a solid affair. This, however, is a misconception, for the top consists of nothing more than six steel ribs, resembling those of an ordinary umbrella, radiating from a small circular piece of wood, of a smaller diameter than the opening of the stump, entirely covered with marble cloth. Their arrangement prevents them from folding down-

wards from the centre block. Half-way down the tree-stump, within its interior, is pivoted a narrow shelf, the unattached end of which protrudes outside the stump, through a slit. This shelf is movable in a horizontal direction, and upon it a weight is supported. To the weight is secured a string, connected also to the centre of the table-top. Whilst the weight is standing upon the shelf the top is sufficiently rigid to conceal its formation. But immediately upon the protruding end of the shelf being moved sideways, the weight is dislodged, falling instantly to the bottom of the cavity, and of course carrying with it the table-top, which is bound to collapse, as shown in Fig. 23.

Fig. 24 shows the appearance of this curious article after the top has so effectively disappeared. Fig. 25 illustrates the interior.

The article drawn in Fig. 26 is one calculated to instil intense fright if its effect be practised upon a visitor at night time and in the dark. Supposing that a jocular old farmer has invited one of his town relatives to spend a few days with him; and, supposing further that the town relative has wished the old farmer "Good-night!" and is lying half awake in his bed, his state would be fearful at suddenly being fully aroused by a shrieking, howling, whistling noise at no great distance from him. Most assuredly he would not hesitate to accept

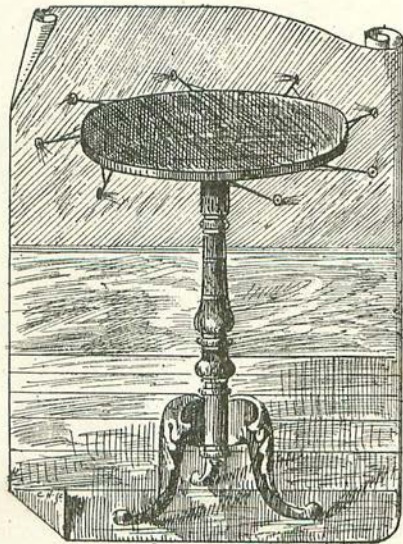


FIG. 26. A WHISTLING TABLE.

the belief that the place was haunted by evil spirits.

The cause of the disturbance can be quickly revealed. An ordinary-looking coffee table is so constructed that its top revolves. A powerful spring is wound around the pivot which extends from the table-top into the pillar. Hinged underneath the top is a series of wires, at the end of each being fixed a whistle resembling the "bird-warblers" sold in such large numbers in our main thoroughfares. Under ordinary circumstances these wires are held flat against the underside of the top by means of pieces of elastic (see Fig. 27), the whistles pointing towards the centre of the table. To a very small catch is connected a length of twine, which passes down the pillar, through one of the claw feet, and out through the door or window, *via* the under-

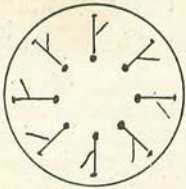


FIG. 27.

A WHISTLING TABLE.

side of the carpet. The table is, of course, made to withstand the strain brought to bear upon it when the twine is pulled, at which moment the catch is released, thereby permitting the top to revolve, the consequence being that the terrific rate of the revolutions impels the wires outwards as seen in Fig. 26, when the wild whirling of the whistles forces the air through them, producing the horrible sounds desired. So soon as the revolving of the top desists, the pieces of elastic exert *their* power, and pull the wires back to their normal position, in which situation they are entirely out of sight.

The object of each and all of the pieces of furniture heretofore described assumes a mild and inoffensive nature when compared to the object of the bedstead illustrated in Fig. 28. Most people are acquainted with the tales relative to travellers, and the risks they ran, in the old coaching days of this country. In isolated inns, men of the road were done to death by brutal landlords for the sake of the money and property which they carried. I have many details in my possession of the forms of secret panels and flooring, by means of which ingress was made to a man's apartment when desired. It was useless for the traveller to lock the door of the room. But the use of this bed entirely obviated the necessity for direct personal

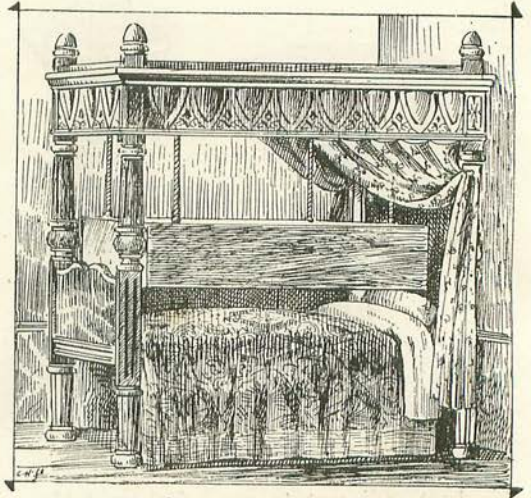


FIG. 28. A SUFFOCATING BEDSTEAD.

contact with the wretched occupant who had sought rest and met conflict. Nothing whatever of a suspicious character revealed itself to the eye of the wayfarer, yet when the scoundrel who meditated crime had satisfied himself that the man slept, he would quickly lower an interior portion of the canopy of the bedstead, firmly imprisoning him in an air-tight cavity until suffocation ensued. Struggling and shouting would be useless under such circumstances, as the weight of the box would be tremendous.

Four ropes pass up through the floor of the room, and travel along shafts in the bed-posts, serving to support the movable portion of the canopy, which, even if something wrong were suspected, one would have great difficulty in detecting to be so treacherously constructed. Of course, more than one pair

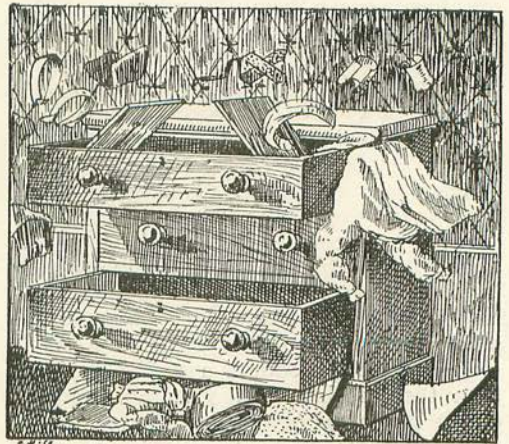


FIG. 29. A SURPRISE CHEST.

of hands would be needed in order to lower this canopy, unless mechanical aid were called into requisition.

Another bedroom article, but, happily, one possessing far different capabilities than the foregoing formidable bedstead, is shown in Fig. 29. The bottoms of the drawers are devised in such a manner that upon certain occasions one of them will, by means of powerful springs fitted beneath it, effect the sudden upheaval of the contents of the drawer upon its being opened, whilst the bottom of another will, at some other time, follow a reverse course, and permit the linen to fall through.

As the details of this article are of a somewhat complicated character, and would prove but tedious reading, I will omit them; but the general construction of the drawers is made clear in Fig. 29.

A door, which might prove very useful if fitted in some of the rooms to which enterprising gentlemen of the burgling persuasion are

sometimes tempted, is shown in Fig. 30. When shut, it resembles an ordinary door; but upon being opened it immediately surprises the visitor by letting its upper half fall heavily upon his unfortunate head.

The reason for the door acting in this forcible manner is explained by the fact that a small projection, or tongue, fits into a hollow in the framing surrounding the doorway when the door is shut, and is drawn from the space upon the door being opened, the direction in which the door is travelling materially aiding the downfall.

I have deemed it fitting to leave the two most gruesome articles of furniture I have encountered until the conclusion of my paper. Fig. 31 shows the purpose to which, I am assured, many worthy and not very sensitive people have devoted the awe-inspiring receptacle

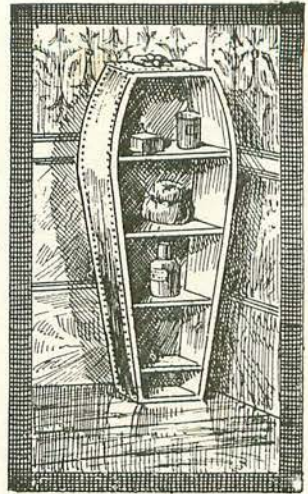


FIG. 31. A COFFIN CUPBOARD.

which is so familiar an object to the eyes of man. Really, I believe there are but few persons who would not shudder at the thought of eating or drinking food which had been contained in so depressing an article.

My last illustration will perhaps convey to the reader the most suggestive impressions. It is shown in Fig. 32. Here we have an article which brings both extremes of existence together—the symbol of *death* is used to rest the babe who has just begun *life*—birth and death are mentally associated upon contemplating this peculiar outcome of man's mind. Whether intended to impress the growing child with the nearness of death, and to demand a due reverence for the future state of man, or whether merely the

result of a morbid desire to connect the mind continually with the undertaker, I cannot venture to say; although it must be admitted that the cross fixed at the head of this curious cradle substantiates the supposition that a religious idea prompted its construction. The bells, which tinkle upon occasions when the cradle is being rocked, seem to point to the wish on the parents' part to comfort the little darling of humanity destined to occupy this coffin-cradle.

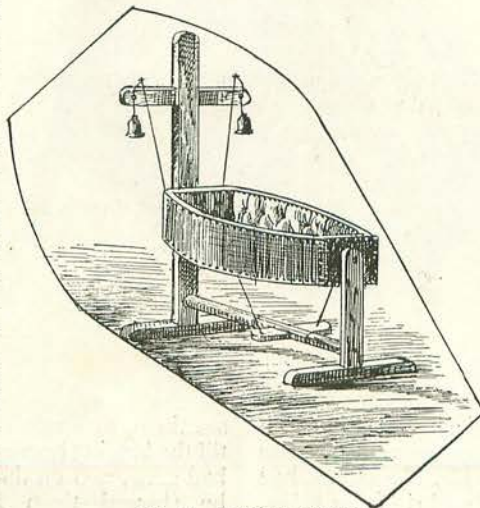


FIG. 32. A COFFIN CRADLE.