

[W. H. DOMVILLE]

THE FREETHINKER'S BURIAL

Reprinted from THE EXAMINER of February 22, 1873.

SIR,—A recent pamphlet, one of Mr. Thomas Scott's series, entitled 'The Book of Common Prayer Examined in the Light of the Present Age,' by Mr. William Jevons, and in which the varying views of St. Paul on a future life are pointed out, has turned my thoughts to the position which Freethinkers of the present and future generations are likely to take with reference to the burial service of the Church of England, and to the question of burials in general.

It will be well known to many of your readers that both in France and Italy Societies of Freethinkers have been established for the express purpose of preventing the clergy from obtruding themselves unsolicited into the presence of dying members of the Society. In this country Freethinkers at present need not much fear being interfered with on their death-beds against their will by the clergy; but still kind or officious friends may try to make the world believe that those who have in their mature years rejected the creeds and fables taught them in their childhood, did at the last hour see the error of their way, give up their deliberate convictions, and accept the orthodox belief that their only chance of a future life of happiness depends upon the merits of a crucified man. Under these circumstances, and even independently of them, many a Freethinker may, if he turns his attention to the subject at all, be desirous of putting on record, as solemnly as possible, his opinions and his wishes, and to such as do so it may occur that, following the fashion of our ancestors, but in an opposite direction, they may, instead of invoking the Holy Trinity and professing to commit their bodies and souls to the keeping of the Almighty, and declaring their belief in the certainty of their resurrection to a future life, or in any other speculative matter, make their will as far as regards their burial somewhat in the following form:—

With respect to my burial, although I have no objection to being buried in what is commonly called consecrated ground, I should prefer non-consecrated ground, being not only fully convinced that the act of no man, be he pope, bishop, or priest of any kind, can make any portion of this earth more holy or sacred than another, but also wishing to enter my protest against the superstitious reverence generally paid to this act of consecration.

Not believing in the dogmas of original sin, the fall of man, the atonement or redemption, and not believing that the man Jesus of Nazareth was born of a virgin, nor in his resurrection after death by crucifixion, nor that he descended into a place called hell, nor that he ascended into a place called heaven, and then sat on the right hand of God, and as I shall not die "in the Lord," according to the views of those who style themselves Orthodox Christians, I express my desire that neither the burial service of the Church of England nor any other religious service shall be performed on the occasion of my remains being consigned to the earth, as it would, in my case, be merely a farce and mockery.

I desire that as little funeral ceremony shall be allowed as possible—a plain coffin [single, and of perishable wood or wicker], a hearse with not more than a pair of horses, no trappings of any kind and no mourning coaches. I request those of my friends who may be present on the occasion will go in their own clothes, and not allow themselves to be dressed like mutes or undertakers' men in grotesque hatbands or scarves."

The above will probably express the real views of a great number among us, and even if surviving friends and relatives differ from those views and would gladly think matters were otherwise, they ought to bear in mind that concealment is not honest, and that the allowing what they will consider a very solemn service of the Church to be performed on such an occasion would simply be *acting a lie*, and ought to be far more abhorrent to them than their acknowledgment of facts that cannot be altered.

I am, &c.,

W. H. D.

P.S. — The following extract from the *Musee des Monumens Francais*, by Alexandre Lenoir (Paris, 1806), may interest your readers: "The refusal of the Clergy to bury Molière caused a great scandal in Paris. The king Louis XIV., being informed of this abuse of the

ecclesiastical power, sent for the priest of St. Eustache (to which parish Molière belonged), and ordered him to bury the poet. This he declined to do, on account of his being an actor, saying that such a man could not be buried in consecrated ground. 'To what depth is the ground consecrated?' inquired the king of the narrow-minded priest. 'To the depth of four feet, sire.' Then bury him six feet deep, and let there be an end of it,' replied the king, turning his back on the priest of St. Eustache."

THE FREETHINKER'S MOURNING.

Reprinted from THE EXAMINER of March 8, 1873.

SIR,—As you have kindly favoured me by inserting my letter on "The Freethinker's Burial," I now venture to trouble you with one on possibly a more delicate subject "The Freethinker's Mourning."

In these days, when men and women allow and encourage their stationers to go on increasing their depth of mourning borders till space is scarcely left for any writing, a few words on the exaggeration of mourning, internal as well as external, may perhaps be permitted. That the Orthodox, full of their "certain hope" that the departed has at once been translated to realms of eternal bliss, where they themselves will (after an interval of the briefest as compared with eternity) in the due course of nature join them, should give way to weeping and wailing,—that grown-up children, themselves old enough to be parents, or even grandparents, should be completely unnerved at death laying its hands on *their* parents, who simply appear to fall asleep, their bodily frames having gradually given way and decayed like the leaf on the tree that has performed its allotted task and drops in its autumn season, is a psychological phase in human nature singularly puzzling to an outsider; but as the ways of the Orthodox are not my ways, I pass them by. My letter is addressed to those who may

be, like myself, Freethinkers; and to them I would say, ought we not always to be prepared for death ourselves, and therefore equally prepared for it in the case of our friends and relatives? Shocks are disagreeable to all; but constant contemplation of what is happening around us will, in every respect, prevent the shock otherwise caused by sudden bereavement. As we learn to look upon our own deaths as the result of laws partly hidden and partly known but never varying, so exactly shall we learn to look upon the deaths of those most dear to us. This uncertainty of life, so far from being an evil, ought to be one of the strongest inducements to all good work. To an earnest Freethinker it should never be possible to grieve over lost opportunities of making those around him better and happier. As I have lived so shall I die. Let my daily thoughts be—This is possibly my last day here; how ought I to act for the best towards myself and others?

So when even the young are cut off from us, let our true regret be lightened by the feeling that, while in no way wasting our time and energies in the study of dogmas on subjects beyond human knowledge, or troubling ourselves about creeds and articles of faith, we have to the very best of our abilities made ourselves masters of the laws of nature, have done all in our power by obedience to those laws to preserve the life of that dear one. When life is cut short by our self-willed ignorance of, or our carelessness about these laws—then, indeed, is there true cause for mourning over an untimely death.

I am, &c.,
W. H. D.