

**Augustus John Cuthbert  
Hare**



*Epitaphs  
for Country  
Churchyards*

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# **Epitaphs for Country Churchyards**



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[goodpress@okpublishing.info](mailto:goodpress@okpublishing.info)

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# Preface

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IN a recent tour on the Wye and among the villages of Herefordshire and Monmouthshire, I have often stopped to examine the Epitaphs in the churchyards. It is sad to see how unsuitable, how almost ludicrous, many of them are. It is not only that they are devoid of beauty, but that they are calculated to drag down the minds of the survivors; chaining them to the recollection of the sufferings which their departed friends endured in their lifetime, harrowing them by the repetition, and in the end holding out no lesson to be learnt, no comfort to look to, no hope of rest in another world.

The chief variety upon these inscriptions is usually a catalogue of the virtues of the deceased, which would belong rather to heathen morality than to Christian humility.

It is strange that amidst the most beautiful scenery, where all nature combines to praise the Maker and Creator of all things, the home of the dead - a place where so many lessons may be learnt, so many solemn warnings given, so many new aims and efforts encouraged - should be utterly devoid of all that can lead the soul upwards, but should

savour only of this world, and the things of it, without one glance at the world beyond.

"An Epitaph," says the poet Wordsworth, in his "Essay on Epitaphs," "is not a proud writing shut up for the studious; it is exposed to all, to the wise and to the most ignorant; it is condescending, perspicuous, and lovingly solicits regard; its story and admonitions are brief; that the thoughtless, the busy and indolent, may not be deterred, nor the impatient tired; the stooping old man cons the engraven record like a second horn-book, the child is proud that he can read it, and the stranger is introduced by its mediation to the company of a friend; it is concerning all, and for all; in the churchyard it is open to the day; the sun looks down upon the stone, and the rains of heaven beat against it."

The benefits which result from this publicity may be seen in the instances which have oftentimes occurred, when in worldly and unbelieving hearts, which have seemed impervious to any ray from the light of God's truth, an impression has been made by the words of a simple Epitaph in a country churchyard, which the reading of many wise books, and the teaching of many wise men, have failed to convey. Perhaps it is that such a lesson comes more solemnly and forcibly in a place where everything reminds us of the end of life, and the destruction of all this world's hopes and aims. Perhaps it may be caused by the memory of the lives and deaths of those whose graves they mark, or from the affection with which they have been regarded. however this may be, it is certain that epitaphs on churchyard gravestones have been one of the means by which God is pleased to warn, and rouse, and teach His

people. But how can this be done, when the epitaph only conveys all that is offensive to the mind; when bad grammar, bad diction, and worse thoughts unite to render it rather ludicrous than instructive?

On three several adjoining gravestones I have often noticed variations of that miserable doggerel which tells of -

"Affliction sore long time I bore,  
Physicians were in vain,  
Till death gave ease, as God was please,  
To ease me of my pain."

This is only one of many Epitaphs of the same kind, which are among the chief favourites in our country villages, and are often repeated over and over again in the same churchyard. In many places the poor are in the habit of bringing a book, which contains a collection of these churchyard rhymes, to the rector of their parish, in order that he may assist them in choosing one for the monument which they intend to set up. In this case the clergyman has the power of trying to persuade the people to be content with a text of Scripture, or even with the name of their friend and the date of his death, instead of rhyme; but in spite of this we see our churchyards rapidly filled with absurd and almost pagan trash.

A great contrast will be seen by those who have travelled on the Continent, in the country churchyards of Germany or Switzerland, where the simple crosses which mark the resting-place of the dead are like beacons of hope and comfort, and the inscriptions tell in beautiful and appropriate words their short tale of life and death, and

remind us how the dead are only gone home before us. In these resting-places mourners may linger and meditate on the happy change for those who are gone, and are not reminded of any earthly cares or sorrows by the sight of their graves. The two simple names which the Germans give to a churchyard are Gottes-Aker, or "God's-acre," and Friedhof, or the "Peace-yard;" and these in themselves are sufficient to shew how dear and holy a place it is to them. Here the widow loves to linger and ponder on the memory of him who is taken away; and here the mother, while resting by the graves of her children, can think with peace, and almost with joy, of the rest and the blessed home whither they are gone.

And why cannot this be the case in England too? Is it because England is a small island in a northern sea that it is to be shut out from all those beautiful thoughts which are suggested through the medium of outward images? Is it because it is a mercantile and busy nation, because it prides itself upon being free from the frivolities of France and the romance of Germany, that its churchyards, instead of being "God's-acre," - thought of and remembered as consecrated ground, and looked upon as the home of the dead, - should be allowed to run wild, uncared for and neglected; often overgrown with nettles and thistles; often considered and used as a lawful sheep-fold by the neighbouring farmers? Above all, is it for this reason that, after wading through a thicket of briars and a bed of nettles, you come to a tomb, where the words, which should, if possible, give comfort, which should certainly teach a lesson to those who look upon it, should only tell

"How pale consumption  
Gave the fatal blow:  
The stroke was certain,  
But the progress slow."

And then, as if these details of the sufferer's last  
illness were not sufficient, proceed to describe, in  
bad spelling, how

"With wasteing pain  
Death found me sore oppress'd,  
Pityed my sighs,  
And surally gave me rest."

Surely these are not the images which it is best that our graves should present; these are not the thoughts to which death and its accompaniments are intended to draw the mind of the living. The Epitaph is not only meant to dwell upon the sufferings of this corruptible body, but it should remind us that the same body is to be raised incorruptible. It is not only to tell of its being sown in corruption, but it should point forward with the finger of hope to the time when it will be raised in in-corruption. It should not only dwell upon the agony of separation from those who are left, but it should point to the time "when those who sleep in Christ shall God bring with Him," - when "there shall be no more parting." Instead of dwelling on the pain on earth, should it not tell of that land where there is no more pain? Instead of dwelling upon earthly sorrow, should it not look beyond to that land " where God shall wipe away all tears from our eyes?" I do not mean that there are not exceptions