

THE CUSTOM OF WEARING "MOURNING."

TO THE EDITOR OF "THE INDEX."

SIR,

I will follow up my last letter on Funeral Rites by a few remarks on the custom of wearing black as a sign of mourning for the dead.

The most obvious objections to it are,—that it adds unnecessarily to the gloom and dejection already caused by bereavement, where grief really exists; that where there is no real grief, the putting on of *signs* of grief is a contemptible sham; that the custom of wearing "mourning" tends greatly to perpetuate unhappy—and, as I conceive, false—views of death; and it is also objectionable in being compulsory upon many families who are too poor to bear the expense. I will say something upon each of these objections.

1. That it adds needlessly to the gloom and dejection of really afflicted relatives must be apparent to all who have ever taken part in these miserable rites. The houses are generally closed until the burial is over, and this of itself is a glaring instance of self-inflicted torture. When the physical frame is already weakened by long watchings, want of sleep, and floods of tears, common sense would direct the sufferers to seek the refreshing stimulants of air and sunshine; to throw open doors and windows and let in God's heavenly messengers of "sweetness and light;" to endeavour to turn the thoughts as much as possible away from the troubled past, and to relieve the dull pain at the

heart by objects and occupations of cheerfulness; to avoid a darkened chamber, or a black dress, as one would avoid the devil—if there were any such “enemy of mankind.” But no sooner is the breath gone from the body of one of the household, than all the blinds are drawn down and the shutters closed, and a fearful race against time is begun with the horrid preparations for “mourning.” Dressmakers are in demand, the anxieties of economical shopping are multiplied, often at the very time when every penny is needed for coming wants or for past doctor’s bills. And all is black—crape—jet; everything hideously black, the blackness only deepened by the white cap or white edging in which it is set. A poor widow, for instance, must shudder afresh over all the realities of her woe, the first time she looks in the mirror after having put on the hateful garb. Her sorrow was surely enough without her being compelled to bear about on her own body its ghastly tokens.

At the funeral, this is made worse still by “mourning coaches,” and that most repulsive thing that moves on earth—the hearse—with its plumes of black stuck all over it, waving and nodding like so many fiends mocking at your grief as they are carrying off their prey. Long and costly hatbands of crape and silk, dozens of costly black gloves which seldom fit, cloaks of the same eternal, infernal black—all contrived to make you feel as miserable and wretched as possible, while the woe at your heart is almost unendurable! Why should we be reminded for months afterwards, by outward tokens, of our sad loss? Every time we brush the little ring of hat left us by the undertaker, we are carried back to that terrible day on which the crape or cloth was first put on, and the very things we ought to try to forget are forced upon our notice at every turn in our lives.

2. But when, as is often the case, there is no real grief, but perhaps a good deal of real rejoicing over the death, the putting on of “mourning” is a piece of hypocrisy and falsehood which nothing can justify. No one will contend that “mourning” is anything but a *sign* of grief; therefore if the sign be assumed when there is no grief, it is an acted lie, and helps to corrupt

society and make it love shams and pretences and varnished deceit. I greatly honour those really broken-hearted widows who keep their "mourning" on all their days, for it is with them a true token, an outward and visible sign of an inward and heartfelt grief which must abide with them through all their weary pilgrimage; but I utterly despise the custom of putting on "mourning" because it is the fashion, and because "people would talk so, you know," if the "mourning" were to be omitted. As a sign of grief, "mourning" would often be much more suitable *before* the death than after it, inasmuch as the grief of watching a beloved one pass through weeks and weeks of physical torture, with the certainty of no recovery, far exceeds the grief of bereavement. It is only a truism to say that death is often the greatest possible relief to the poor sufferer himself, and to the sorrowing relatives. The number of cases in which the grief before far exceeds the grief after death, is much larger than is generally supposed.

3. I come now to the last and perhaps most important objection of all. "Mourning" tends to perpetuate unhappy and false views of death. To those who have no belief in immortality and re-union with our dear ones after death, it might seem only natural to give oneself up to despair and to all its horrible outward signs. But to those who profess to believe, and who really do believe, that the dead are still living in a happier world, free from earthly pain and sorrow, it ought to be quite natural to rejoice and give thanks "that it hath pleased Almighty God to take unto himself the soul of the departed, and to deliver him from the miseries of a sinful world,"—to quote from the Christian Burial Service. Death ought to be looked upon as at least as much of a heavenly boon to the beloved one, as a source of bitter pain to ourselves. But that pain itself would be greatly diminished if we were trained to *think* of death as we are trained to *talk* about it; if we were brought up to feel that it is a manifest and real benefit, and however distressing to survivors, is not to be regarded from its dark side. By refusing to darken our homes and to gird ourselves in

black raiment, we would make our protest against the melancholy—the unmitigated melancholy—of the popular views of death. We would shake off as much as we could that morbid weeping and sighing which are so destructive to health and enfeebling to the mind. We would let the world know that however great our loss, however irreparable it might be on earth, we still trusted in the loving kindness of God, and unselfishly resigned into His hands the soul of our nearest and dearest, believing that He can and will, as a faithful Creator, give us a happy meeting in a brighter home above.

I have myself resolved never to put on “mourning” again—not even for my children or my wife; and I will do my best to persuade others to get rid of this most cruel and oppressive burden. (In the case of a *public* “mourning,” I would make an exception; but this would be altogether on different grounds, and would be worn for the sake of strangers who know not my private opinions.) One thing seems very clear; it is our bounden duty to mitigate and remove all the grief we possibly can. We have no right to add to our natural distress by artificial means, nor to bemoan any loss longer than we can possibly help. If we believed in God and in His fidelity more, we should be the better assured of our meeting again beyond the tomb.

I am, Sir,

Yours very sincerely,

CHARLES VOYSEY.

DULWICH, S.E., *March 31st*, 1873.