

Some twenty months ago Judge Kettle gave, at Palmerston North, a little homily on the prevalence of 'shouting' in New Zealand. He does not view the habit with very marked approval. So much, at least, we infer from his remark that it is 'a foolish, stupid habit, and one of the curses of the country.' He at the same time expressed regret that some legislation could not be devised to stamp the custom out of existence. With all our reputation as a (relatively) temperate people, there are, even among the most moderate drinkers in this Colony few who have the courage to say 'no' in answer to the customary phrase: 'Have one with me.' Some years ago—so the story runneth—a French immigrant, who was in a state of baptismal innocence as to English and colonial drinking customs, asked a New Zealand squatter: 'What must I say eef a man asks me to drink?' 'Oh,' said the man of acres, 'you just say "All right," or "Don't care if I do"—and just sail in.' 'Yes. But eef I no want to drink?' The squatter cudgelled his brains for a few moments. Then he said: 'Well, Frenchy, you've fairly floored me this time. Never knew a man to refuse.' 'Bacchus has drowned more than Neptune.' So runs the Spanish proverb. A far-reaching non-treating organisation would save many a youth from looking too often on the wine when it sparkleth in the glass, and would do more for the cause of temperance in these colonies than a dozen regiments of prohibitionists. It would at least teach our young men to say 'no' at critical moments and snap their fingers in the face of old and evil custom. And, after all, much of personal virtue and character-formation depends on the capacity to say 'no' and mean it at the proper time.

A BURNING QUESTION.

EARLY in 1898 Wellington had its burning question, when the local cremationists agitated for the erection of a crematorium by the rate-payers of the Empire City. A similar agitation is now bubbling in Dunedin in a small way, and has boiled over into the columns of the daily papers. Cremationists and anti-cremationists have been administering sounding thwacks to each others' polls, sometimes, it must be confessed, with the weapon of the court jester, sometimes with that of Sampson. To the great body of people cremation is both unsightly and repulsive. And, as usual in discussions on this subject, the supporters of the old primeval system are serenely confident that the strength of public opinion is, and long will be, too great to permit of any extensive change in the principle of returning the bodies of our race to the earth from which the Creator compacted them.

The subject has been debated in all the moods and tenses from the days of Julian the Apostate down to Sir Henry Thompson and Erichsen. Since 1874 over 3000 books and pamphlets have been written on cremation. They have searched the sanitary, legal, economical, and religious aspects of the question from Dan to Beersheba—and left it pretty well where they found it. During the discussions of the subject in Dunedin, as in Wellington over two years ago, the sanitary side of the question came uppermost, and the lingering putrefaction of earth-burial, as at present generally practised, was made the theme of strong, and we may add, generally well-merited, condemnation. In other words, the abuses of earth-burial have furnished the cremationists with the best plea for the propaganda of a mode of disposing of the dead which many barbarous nations abandoned when civilisation spread among them. The whole case against earth-burial hangs by practices which are accidental to it. We refer more especially to heavy and durable wooden and leaden coffins, vaults, brick graves, and, generally, to all attempts to shield the bodies of the dead from the dissolvent and disinfectant action of air and mother earth. Earth to earth burial (without coffins) was the usual method followed by the early Christians, and the long and crowded corridors of the underground cities of the dead that stretch outside the walls of Rome are to-day as sweet and free from evil odors as if their *loculi* were filled with the cinerary urns which became fashionable in pagan Rome in the days when the simple ways of the olden days had been abandoned and manners had become corrupt.

The era of strong coffins began in England in the closing years of the Second Charles. A remarkable judgment by Lord Stowell shows the strong objection with which the official mind of the period viewed this effort to secure an unnatural survival of the crude outward form of the corpse and vain resistance to the law of dissolution. The custom still endures—in the interests of the undertakers. The unnatural and unsanitary condition of bodies enclosed in coffins of lead or heavy wood or in brick graves was exemplified in a horrible way when the burial-ground of St. Andrew's, Holborn (London), was removed to make way for the present Viaduct. 'Little difference,' says a writer in the July *Quarterly*, 'as to condition could be perceived between the coffins of Charles II.'s time and those recently used, or between the coffins which were of lead and those which were of wood. In the coffins which were intact, their contents were also intact, but unrecognisable. 'In

one part of the cemetery,' says another writer, 'was a plague-pit, where the bodies of the dead had been thrown in just as they had come carted from the neighboring street. Fear was abroad in the land, and there was no time to think of coffins. The result was that when the pit was opened the poor uncared-for corpses had wholly disappeared, enfolded in the bosom of mother-earth, and through her embrace restored to the world as the elements of life.'

Those best versed in sanitary science are unanimous in holding that nothing more injurious than carbonic acid is given off by cemeteries. And for this the surrounding vegetable world has such a voracious appetite that it is instantly absorbed. The huddled corpses of the victims of the great bubonic plague of London were probably covered with a light top-dressing of only one or two feet of earth! And yet their shallow and crowded sepulchre was never known to have served as a centre of infection. The same holds true of the old and narrow roofed cemetery of the Capuchins in Rome. There a thin covering of earth from the Holy Land closely embraced the coffinless forms of the dead. After a brief period of this true earth to earth sepulture, nothing but the clean, dry bones remained. These were disinterred and were placed around the rooms in niches, or they were separated and wrought into grotesque adornments for the walls and ceilings. The little cemetery was daily visited by the curious, or by pious people intent upon meditation on the last things. But king microbe does not seem to have molested them particularly, and some of the monks who spent hours daily in this anatomical museum lived to a great old age. Early in 1873 the Prussian Government sent a secret commission to examine into the condition of the dead that were slain on the battlefields of the Vosges in 1870. The results are briefly summed up in the following words: 'In some cases as many as 800 soldiers had been hastily thrust into a shallow trench. And yet after an interval of two years the bodies had disappeared and only the bones and accoutrements remained. To this rule there was one significant exception: the dead officers had been buried in mackintoshes, and the result was very much as if they had been buried in coffins. To put the thing shortly: the decomposition of a body depends upon the porousness of the soil and coffin.' And the moral of it all is this: what we need is not the frying-pan or destructor method of disposing of our corpses and of those of our sisters and our cousins and our aunts, but a reform of our funeral customs—the abolition of heavy wooden and leaden coffins, vaults, brick graves, and all attempts to retard the swift and wholesome action of the earth on the bodies of the dead. In other words, a return to the good old rule, the simple plan of firm-y, perishable coffins and earth to earth burial.

The legal objections to cremation have never been satisfactorily answered. Briefly, it would put a premium on crime by destroying evidence such as has, over and over again, brought to justice poisoners like Mrs. Webster, Mary Anne Cotton, and others such. Numerous instances in which murderers have been brought to justice through the exhumation of the lawfully interred bodies of their victims are given by the writer of the article in the *Quarterly* for July. Dr. Bond, of the Westminster Hospital, furnishes several cases in point. And he adds that he 'has no doubt that many persons skilled in the use of poisons would more frequently resort to them if it were not for the knowledge that their operations were liable to be handicapped by exhumation.' Dr. Braxton Hicks, one of the two experts examined by the House of Commons Commission, gave it as his opinion that a post-mortem examination should be held on every body brought to Woking for cremation; that it would be 'a criminal act' to destroy a body without such inquiry; that earth-burial is 'better from a sanitary point of view' than cremation; that, in fact, 'in a sanitary point of view it is perfect'; that it tends 'absolutely in no way whatever to spread infectious disease'; and that 'any statement to the contrary is a statement which is not warranted by fact.' The writer in the *Quarterly* points out that it takes two hours to turn a single corpse into its residuum of grey ash, and a whole working day to destroy half a dozen. From these figures we can roughly estimate the delay and the enormous cost of roasting the dead of a great city.

In the Vienna crematorium, the dead are treated like parcels of meat and grocery: they are shot through pneumatic tubes from the city to the roasting establishments. Under their present anti-clerical management the bodies of paupers and of the unknown dead in the great hospitals of Paris are first consigned to doctors and medical students. After they have been duly hacked and scarified and dissected they are returned to the hospitals, carted pell-mell to the Père Lachaise crematorium, dumped into the furnaces without religious rites—to the number of some 27,000 a year. For Catholics cremation is strictly forbidden by decree of Pope Leo XIII., dated May 17, 1886. Curiously enough, about the same time a similar prohibition of cremation was issued to the Jews of Italy by the General Consistory of