

# FEAR OF BEING BURIED ALIVE IS GROUNDLESS

## Popular Belief That Such a Fate Is Common Exploded by the London Lancet, After Careful Study of the Matter.



Prince Hermann of Saxe-Weimar.

Duke of Saxe-Weimar, Whose Family has Taken Extreme Precautions Against Being Buried Alive.

**A**LTHOUGH the subject of premature burial has been exploited by novelists, by sensational newspapers, and by mere notoriety seekers, until it has become a haunting dread to the people at large, there is really but little ground for alarm.

To be buried alive is beyond doubt a fate sufficiently dreadful to cause the blood to run cold at the mere thought. But in spite of all the stories to the contrary, it is a peril that in modern times is to all intents and purposes non-existent.

There is no scientific journal in the Old World that speaks with a greater degree of authority than the London Lancet, which is the official organ of the Royal Colleges of Physicians and of Surgeons—institutions that enjoy the monopoly of the practice of medicine and surgery in Great Britain.

Speaking ex cathedra in an editorial article, the Lancet calls attention to the fact that in all the thousands of post-mortem examinations which have been performed throughout the civilized world during the last fifty years, there has not been a single authenticated case of the supposed corpse under examination showing signs of life, such as would invariably appear at the dissection of a living subject.

And the Lancet points out that the bodies upon which post-mortem examinations are performed are in no sense selected, but include those of persons of both sexes, and of all ages, who have died all sorts of natural and violent deaths, and at widely varying intervals of time before the *sectio cadaveris*.

The Lancet also lays stress on the fact that in Austria, where during the last half century a most elaborate system of death-certification has been in force, providing that every body before burial must be seen at least twice within forty-eight hours after death by two independent medical men, and by one of them again before the closing of the coffin, no single instance has ever occurred of the fact of death being controverted during these repeated examinations.

Moreover, in the mortuary halls which have been inaugurated at Vienna, Munich, and in nearly all the big German and Austrian cities where uncoffined bodies are kept at the request of friends under observation for eight days, and even longer, indeed until death has been absolutely established by the onset of unmistakable signs of decomposition, not one of the many thousands who have been laid out in this manner has ever risen from his or her probationary bier.

In one word, the Lancet, speaking with all the authority of the Royal Colleges of Physicians and of Surgeons in England, declares that, at any rate as far as the last fifty years are concerned, statistics go to show that cases of premature burial, or of death under the passing knife, or at the hands of the embalmer, are unknown.

The London Lancet has performed a very valuable service in issuing this authoritative pronouncement, which should receive the widest publicity, since it will rob death of some of the terrors which Edgar Allan Poe did so much to develop in his gruesome tales. These terrors extend to all classes of the population.

Even the pointed of the Lord are not exempt therefrom, although one would imagine that the care lavished by physicians on their royal charges would be of a nature to preclude any risk of death

being certified, until it had actually been proved beyond all possibility of doubt.

Some of the reigning houses of Europe are to such an extent a prey to alarm regarding premature entombment, that they have devised special precautions to guard against anything of the kind. This is notably the case at Weimar. There the Furstengruft, or Mausoleum of the Princes, as it is called, has, standing among its sarcophagi, a marble table.

Whenever there is a death in the reigning family, the coffin, after the funeral, is placed on this marble table, with the lid loose. Around the fingers of the corpse are wound fine wires, which communicate with an alarm. In fact, the least movement, or even pulsation, will ring the bell in an adjoining chamber, where a guardian is always on the watch, who can at once secure by telephone medical attendance.

Not until three or four weeks have passed are the wires that communicate with the bell cut, the casket finally sealed up and placed in the sarcophagus which constitutes its last resting place.

I may add that there are only two non-royal personages who repose in this Furstengruft at Weimar, namely, the bodies of Schiller and Goethe, the presence of whose remains there constitutes a rare posthumous honor.

The mausoleum, is well lighted, and located in grounds that convey far more the impression of a beautiful garden than of a cemetery. Indeed, it is the many coffins and sarcophagi arranged in lines in the mausoleum, that alone recall to the mind of the visitor the real character of the building.

In spite of all these precautions, the Princes of the Grand Ducal family of Saxe-Weimar seem to deem it necessary to make still further provision for their protection against the peril of being entombed alive. Thus when the late Prince Hermann of Saxe-Weimar died a few years ago he expressly commanded his children and his executors to see that before his coffin was finally closed and sealed up in the sarcophagus, an incision should be made in his body to ascertain whether he was really dead.

It is known that these instructions were complied with by the physicians who were with him at the time of his demise. Prince Ernest of Saxe-Weimar, who at the time of his decease in 1908, was commanding as General, a brigade of cavalry, with headquarters at Frankfurt, insisted upon a similar posthumous test by his physicians before being consigned to the crematorium.

For he enjoyed the distinction of having been the first Prince of the Blood in modern times to have his remains cremated. And the late Grand Duke and Grand Duchess of Saxe-Weimar also stipulated in their testamentary instructions that the utmost care should be observed by their physicians, to avoid any danger of their being buried alive.

Just why the Princes and Princesses of the Saxe-Weimar dynasty should be in such dread of premature entombment it is difficult to explain. There is a sort of tradition that in olden times one of the members of that house was entombed alive. But the most searching investigation has failed to reveal any foundation for this story. Indeed there is no record in existence of any royal personage ever having been buried alive through error.

In fact, one would think that Royal Princes and Princesses were even more exempt from any such danger than ordi-

ary people, since court etiquette requires that their remains should lie in state for eight or ten days prior to their obsequies. To show how such reports originate, it is only necessary to recall the case of the late King of Holland.

In 1889 the latter was known to be at the point of death. Through some mistake a report was issued that he had breathed his last, and as his demise had been awaited for several days, and his recovery had been pronounced hopeless, the rumor received immediate credence, public buildings were quickly decorated with black hangings and crape, flags half-masted, and his cousin, the ex-Duke of Nassau, was actually proclaimed Grand Duke of Luxemburg in his stead, when suddenly it was discovered that the news was, to say the least, premature, and that the old monarch was making an almost miraculous recovery.

Indeed, he survived for another twelve months; long enough to denounce what he was pleased to describe as "the outrageously indecent haste" his subjects had shown to welcome a change in the succession to the thrones of Holland and of Luxemburg.

But the affair gave rise to a story that he had fallen into a cataleptic trance so death-like that all, doctors included, were

convinced that he had passed away; a tale untrue in every particular.

Others who, like the Princes of the House of Saxe-Weimar, have entertained a fear of being buried alive, and who have left instructions in their wills calculated to protect themselves against such a fate, include Lord Lytton, the novelist, who insisted that after his death had been certified a needle should be run through his heart by his physician, just before entombment.

Edmund Yates, founder, owner, and editor of the London World, left a special fee of one hundred dollars to his doctor, with the direction that the jugular vein of his corpse should be opened before cremation. Alfred Nobel, the inventor of dynamite, directed that a week after his death his veins should be opened, and that only then his remains should be consigned to the crematorium.

Lady Burton, the widow of the famous traveler and explorer, Sir Richard Burton,

left written instructions in her will that after her death her heart was to be pierced with a needle, before being turned over to the embalmers; and Daniel O'Connell, the Irish patriot; Hans Christian Andersen, of fairy-tale fame; Wilkie Collins, the novelist; Herbert Spencer, and the Hon. George W. Bentinck, are all on record as having made testamentary provision against being buried alive.

This does not, however, in any way mean that there was any foundation for their apprehensions. It cannot be taken as anything more than an indication that they had allowed themselves to be influenced by the stories which they had heard of living burial; stories for which, as the London Lancet shows, there is no foundation, at any rate in modern times.

That instances occurred formerly, when human life was held more cheaply, and when the science of medicine was not merely in its infancy, but in an embryonic condition, is more than probable. Plato, 400 years before Christ, urged that the bodies of the dead be not buried until the third day, lest by chance life should remain; and centuries later, Pliny dealt, in his famous work on natural history, with the difficulty of determining death.

"How comes it about," he inquires, "that patients given over for dead by their physicians sometimes recover, and that some even have returned to life at the very time of their funerals?" History teaches us that the Egyptians of old watched the bodies of their dead for many days before proceeding to embalm them, and that the ancient Greeks and Romans were in the habit of subjecting corpses to various tests of death, sometimes by the cutting off of a finger, before consigning them to the tomb or to the flames.

Servius, in describing the death of Virgil, tells us that "on the eighth day they burned the body, and on the ninth put its ashes into the grave," while Quintilian explains that the Romans delayed their burials "for no other reason than because we have seen persons return to life after they were about to be laid in the grave as dead."

It is also true that when, owing to the gradual expansion of towns, or for other reasons, graveyards have been dug up, there have been rare cases of remains found in very ancient tombs that seemed to indicate premature burial. But in spite of all investigation of the subject, and its study, not only by savants and medical organizations, but also by societies formed for the prevention of premature burial, no case of the kind is on authentic record as having occurred during the last fifty years: a fact which should go far to allay popular apprehension about the matter.

Advantage has occasionally been taken of this popular dread to promote much-needed legislation; as, for instance, when a few years ago in England the subject was exploited for all it was worth by those who were engaged in securing the enactment of a law exacting that nobody should be buried or cremated without a medical certificate of death given after a personal inspection of the body by a registered physician.

How necessary a law of this kind was is shown by the thousands upon thousands of interments which took place each year without any medical certificate; while in many instances, where the relatives and friends went to the trouble to secure a certificate, they obtained it without difficulty from doctors who knew nothing of the case, except by hearsay, and who gave the document without having seen the

person it concerned either in life or after death.

This condition of affairs, which existed until only a few years ago, led to all sorts of shocking abuses, the reformation of which encountered so much opposition that the champions of the measure felt themselves perfectly justified in invoking the popular dread of living burial in support of their movement. But even they were unable to submit to Parliament any authentic case in modern times of premature burial, either at home or abroad.

With regard to the so-called "Waiting Mortuaries," which, as I have mentioned above, are now to be found in almost every German and Austrian city and town, it is perfectly true that the first ones owed their origin to the fear of living burial. These date, however, from nearly 100 years ago, the first one having been instituted at Weimar and the second and third at Munich and Vienna respectively.

If they have become so numerous since—in Munich alone there are no less than ten of them—it is not so much because they tend to allay apprehensions of premature burial, but for sanitary reasons. For it has tended to put an end to the practice, especially among the poorer classes, of retaining the remains of the dead in the living apartments of a crowded quarter during the three, four, and sometimes eight days that intervene between the demise and the obsequies.

In American cities, unless the death has been due to some contagious disease, the body is permitted to remain for a number of days in the family home before the funeral occurs; and there is often a tendency, prompted by grief, to defer the obsequies as long as possible; to postpone, in one word, the hour of the last farewell. This cannot be wholesome, either for the living occupants of the home, or even for the people who reside in the same house or in the same block, especially in crowded tenement districts and during the summer months.

At Munich, and in the other German cities where these so-called "Waiting Mortuaries" have been instituted, the dead are removed as quickly as possible, usually a few hours only after the demise, to these establishments, which, well ventilated, lighted, and kept constantly bright with palms and flowers, have nothing gruesome about them. There the bodies, dressed in their ordinary clothes, are laid upon tables, amid flowers, shrubs, and green plants—those of the poor, in long apartments, those of the well-to-do in private—and there they remain, under the watch of a resident staff of doctors and attendants, quick to note if there is the slightest sign of returning life, and who, if the body shows any trace of decomposition, take steps to preserve it until the hour of the funeral.

The mourners are free to visit their dead at all hours of the day, and find nothing in the surroundings to shock their sensibilities. It is a remarkable fact that in all of these "Waiting Mortuaries," some of which have been in existence for over 100 years, there is not one duly authenticated case of the dead having returned to life; not one solitary case of suspended animation.

This fact, emphasized by the London Lancet in its issue of two weeks ago, should go far to allay, if not entirely remove, the popular impression, so industriously exploited by sensation mongers, to the effect that premature burial is frequent in these modern times and that no one is altogether safe from the danger of being entombed alive.