

GRANDFATHER'S WIT

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OUR grandfathers enjoyed a frank, robust humour that our sensitive age has pushed into the attic of forgotten things along with buttoned boots and crockery wash basins. An age that insists on corsets being foundation garments couldn't possibly say what it honestly thinks about any of the important events in life. This is nowhere more apparent than in our stereotyped epitaphs. All is chaste and correct in the modern cemetery, and all the people who lie below the elaborate headstones lived exemplary lives. Not so in grandfather's time. He said what he meant, and in forthright terms, too.

The old churchyards of England yield a fine crop of epitaphs which to us are almost unbelievable, but they are really there, carved in enduring granite. Here are two, apparently written by long-suffering husbands:

Here lies all that was mortal,
Of Arabella Young,
Who on the 25th of May
Began to hold her tongue.

Beneath this stone lies Katherine my wife,
In death my comfort, and my plague through life;
O liberty!—but soft, I must not boast,
She'll haunt me else, by jingo, with her ghost!

A gentle reminder of the uncertainty of life is found on a stone in Marnhull Churchyard:

Remember me as you pass by;
As you are now so once was I.
As I am now, so you must be,
Therefore prepare to follow me.

Some facetious lad, reading this, added his reply in blue paint below the verse,

To follow you I'm not content,
Unless I knew which way you went.

From Bidstone churchyard comes this verse of ambiguous meaning:

Nineteen years a maid,
No years a wife,
Nine days a mother
And then departed life.

Belonging to this age of delicacy, we prefer to believe the best interpretation.

In a spirit of almost gentle speculation is this couplet from a Devonshire churchyard:

Since I am so quickly done for,
I wonder what I was begun for.

In the same part of England is found the following verse, which surprisingly, has a good word for one Betsy Binn:

Here lies the body of Betsy Binn
Who was so very good within;
She bust this outer shell of sin,
And hatched herself a cherubim.

We certainly have lost a lot in humour since the old churchyard was superseded by the cold, conventional cemetery, but perhaps it is just as well considering our super-sensitive reactions. We can at least preserve some of our self-respect for posterity.
