

Reminiscences of a Wayfarer

Some of the important events of the Pioneer Days of Richardson County and Southeast Nebraska, as remembered by the writer, who has spent fifty-one years here.

THE FIRST FUNERAL IN FALLS CITY.

Before the summer waned, and the woods along the river to the south, took on the russet and golden hues peculiar to the autumnal season, something happened in our little out-of-the-way community—something that always occurs in the haunts of men all over the world—one of our people died. It was the first visitation of the grim monster, death, to the new town, and it was made all the more sad because of the fact that the one to go was a little girl of ten or twelve years of age, who had through all the long summer weather, been a patient sufferer from some lingering disease, which, with no medical assistance at hand—there was no doctor in town, nor in the county for that matter—had baffled every effort of loving parents and the kindness of humane neighbors to stay its slow but deadly work of destruction of the frail life in a frailer and wasting body, and on a quiet Sunday morning, when far off church bells in other lands were calling the people to hear the oft told story of another life, another death, and triumphant resurrection, the little one ceased from among the living, and the mysterious purpose of her existence on earth, was accomplished.

Death under any circumstances, and at all times, is a very sad and sorrowful affair, but when we reflect that it is just as natural for persons to die, as it is for them to be born and live, we must conclude that it is quite as necessary in the eternal economy as any other inevitable condition; and as it is agreed on all hands by the profoundest thinkers the world has yet produced, that every thing in universal nature, exists from inexorable and absolute necessity, the postulate that death has a like existence, must be received as a truth admitted.

The conventional idea that death came upon the world as a result of man's disobedience, is admissible as applied to man himself—the world of men—for, being of a higher order in the realm of creation, he was not subject to the common vicissitudes of other and lower orders of organic life. This conclusion is not at variance with the most orthodox teaching on the subject, nor in conflict with the sacred history of man's creation, his sin, and his fall, for it is recorded that when placed in the garden, he was told, that "of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat.—But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it; for in the day thou eatest thereof, thou shalt surely die."

The serpent, which is generally understood to mean the devil, got into the garden somehow, and told old mother Eve, that the Lord did not mean that they would necessarily die on the day they should eat of the fruit of the forbidden tree, but that He knew that when they did eat of the fruit they would become as gods knowing good and evil. Whatever else may be said of that much denounced personage, the devil, he was not a strict constructionist, and in that case he was tolerably near right, for though the sentence of death would surely follow the forbidden act, it was yet indeterminate so far as its late of execution was concerned; and the construction put upon it by the wily serpent was the true one, and the deception practiced was all the more

be seen in the slums and purities in the overcrowded tenement districts of great cities, but poverty of means to utilize the super-abundance of nature, that was everywhere going to waste because of the want of such means. This has been characteristic of the frontier on this continent for three hundred years. The pioneers have always been poor in that sense, but in sober truth, they were the richest people on the globe—teeming with the wealth of courage and hope, stalwart empire builders, who made present conditions possible, including that splendid spirit of intellectual emulation now rife among the good people, of who can sport the most expensive automobile.

The people were probably no different from what they are now, but in a way I can hardly explain, they showed their sympathy for the bereaved family by little acts of kindness, so delicately administered, as to make them appear, when recalled at this distant day, totally unlike anything of the kind to come under my observation, before or since. The surroundings, no doubt, and the fact that it was the first death to occur in the town, coupled with the further fact that the little child had to be put away in a lonely grave by itself on the wide silent prairie, had much to do with it, but the impression was produced just the same, and has never been removed.

The arrangements for the funeral were very simple and of the most primitive and inexpensive character, as of necessity they had to be. Squire Dorrington, who was a skilled mechanic, made the coffin out of some green walnut boards—there was no seasoned lumber to be had—and carried it on his shoulder to the house of mourning. The good women in the town

struction was correct is further shown by what followed the discovery of the great transgression. The Lord said: "Behold, the man has become as one of us, to know good and evil," etc.; and lest he put forth his hand and eat of the fruit of an other tree in that garden of the gods and live forever, he must be put out, to "till the ground from whence he was taken," and man's real tribulations on earth began. That construction was correct, impliedly, in another particular. The sentence of death was against the body, not the soul, for that was an emanation from God himself and stamped with his own immortality. Potentially, every human soul has had the same immortal existence in past eternity, that the incomprehensible entity, or force, that breathed into the nostrils of Adam the breath of life and made him a living soul, has had, and can no more perish than God can perish. No other or more conclusive argument is needed to prove the immortality of the soul; and what was true of Adam, is true of all his race. But I have wandered somewhat from the task I had set myself of telling of the first death and funeral, that occurred in Falls City. And so, to resume, I remark that I certainly know of but two other persons in life, besides myself, who may have some recollection of the circumstance and they are William E. Dorrington, who was then a boy of eleven or twelve years of age, and Maj. J. Edward Burbank, now a resident of the city of Malden, in the state of Massachusetts. All the others who lived in the town, or assisted in those humble obsequies of that little child in the wilderness, have themselves gone the way whence they too, will not return. She was the daughter of Mr. Isaac L. Hamby, a gentleman whom I have mentioned several times in these papers, and who lived in a cheap and illy constructed house, or rather shanty, that stood about where Mr. L. A. Ryan's dwelling house now stands, directly west of the Catholic church. The house was no better, nor for that matter, very little worse, than the dwellings of most of the people in town, but it was anything but a comfortable habitation for people in good health, and certainly no place for one with a lingering disease, where every hour was an eternity of suffering. It was a mere shell, with no wall under it and no plastering, or partitions, except some brown sheeting stretched across, dividing the inside space into two compartments or rooms, and that was all the privacy for the family, afforded by it. The winds, and they were sometimes a gale, and the rain, ran riot about and through the rude structure, with its thin coating of cottonwood boards that the sun had warped out of shape in many places, leaving a mple spaces for the elements to enter without hindrance. There was no tree or shrub, no front yard, or garden; nothing but the boundless sea of prairie, stretching away in all directions, the distant horizon and the blue arch of heaven overhead. The furnishings were in keeping with the poor appointments everywhere, only the commonest for necessary use and nothing for ornament or comfort, for the occupants.

This was poverty, but not the kind of poverty that accompanies squalor, filth, drunkenness,

were there in force and among them they constructed an old fashioned shroud of the best material to be had in the market, and it was, like everything else, of the rudest description; and having clothed the worn and wasted little body with that last garment of all living, it was tenderly placed in the coffin upon which a few wild flowers some friend had gathered on the prairie, were laid, and thus the bier of the first of the dead of this community, stood confessed.

We buried the little one the following afternoon, but with scant ceremonials. There was no minister of the gospel of any persuasion in the town at the time, and therefore, no services of a religious nature were had at the house, but it was decided by some of the good ladies, Mrs. Van Lew and Mrs. Burbank who were both members of the Episcopal church, that the service for the dead prescribed in the prayer book of that denomination, should be read at the grave, and I was asked to perform that duty, which I did as best I could. There was no cemetery, but we started one that day on a school section, just west of town, a kind of no-man's land, or Tom Tidder's ground; and as it grew from year to year, the land was purchased from the state by authority of an act of the legislature, and a regular cemetery association was formed, and for several years all the dead of our people were buried there. As neither the soil nor the location were best suited for the purpose, an other site was procured to the north of the old one, and on the highest ground in the neighborhood, which Joseph Steele, the owner, donated under certain conditions, and it has come to be the chief burial ground for the city, and one of the most

beautiful of all the resting places for the dead in the whole state. During the half century that has elapsed since that day, I have attended many funerals and witnessed many sorrowful scenes in connection with them, but I have seen none that impressed me as that did. It seemed to me a cruel thing to bury her in that solitary waste, all alone in the brooding silence of mighty nature, there to remain forever, to be first neglected, and then forgotten. I was younger then and more impressive perhaps, on that ac-

count, but be that as it may, I shall never live long enough to get away, in thought at least, from that humble funeral procession, performed on foot, following the two horse lumber wagon in which reposed all that was mortal of one of those little ones, whom the Master said were typical of the Kingdom; nor will I ever get away from that strange feeling of sadness, with which I scattered a handful of cold earth on the coffin below, and pronounced the words of the ritual: "Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust."

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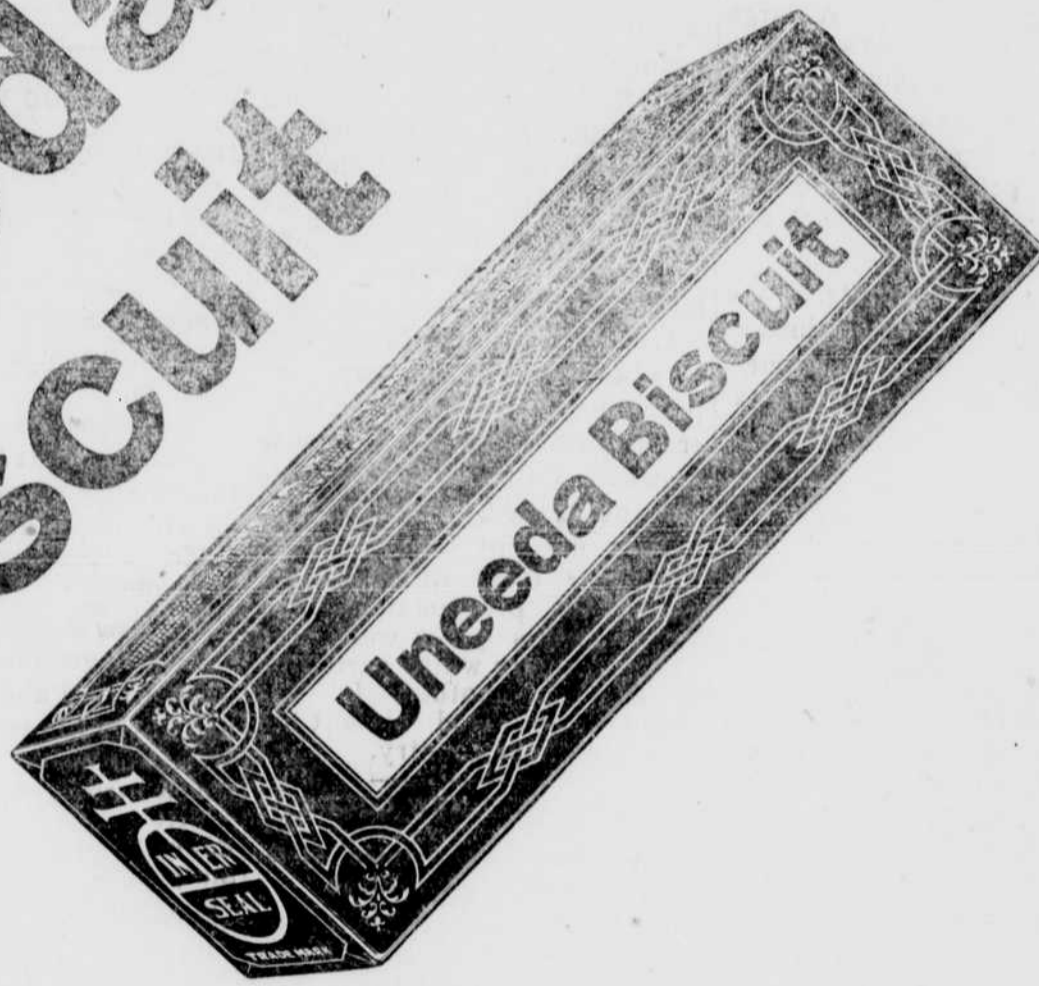
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