



With Deepest Sorrow

Katja Dell lifts the veil on the
Victorian's fascination for death
and mourning



THE WIDOW OF WINDSOR

"AVE YOU 'EARD O' THE WIDOW AT WINDSOR, WITH A HAIRY GOLD CROWN ON 'ER 'EAD? SHE 'AS SHIPS ON THE FOAM, SHE 'AS MILLIONS AT 'OME, AN' SHE PAYS US POOR BEGGARS IN RED."

On the 14th December 1861, Windsor Castle witnessed a tragedy. Queen Victoria's beloved husband and father of her nine children died of a suspected typhoid fever or possibly Crohn's disease, as modern researchers suggest.

After a 21-year partnership and a joint rule of the country, Victoria had lost her lover, confidant and best friend. Albert's death marked the beginning of the reign of the Widow of Windsor.

The grief-stricken Queen was inconsolable and became a recluse. She clad herself in black and insisted on her children and servants doing the same as a sign of respect.

The country soon followed suit and a new fashion for deep mourning was now all the talk among the well-to-do society. The Prince Consort's rooms were kept as pristine as they were during his life. A water basin was placed on the dressing table for his morning shave, and even his chamber pot was meticulously cleaned every day.

By Victoria's decree, statues of Albert were erected in every part of the country. The Parliament and subjects that had initially sympathised with the Queen's loss, were now beginning to worry about the national budget and the "no expense spared" philosophy their monarch adopted, to glorify her departed husband.

The Victorian cult of death was well on the way to becoming one of the most bizarre phenomena in British history.

A FLOURISHING BUSINESS FOR UNDERTAKERS

The industrial revolution brought remarkable new technology, but was also the principal reason for overpopulated London slums. Child mortality was a daily occurrence due to diphtheria, cholera, malnutrition, typhoid and tuberculosis.

Even the genteel society was not immune to the visits of the grim reaper.

Penicillin, antiseptics and anaesthetics had not yet been invented, making surgery and even childbirth a dangerous procedure. Many foods contained harmful additives; an example is alum for bleaching bread. Poisons like strychnine and arsenic were widely available from the local chemist and commonly used for poisoning rats. Alarming quantities of arsenic were even present in the fashionable green wallpaper and fabrics, marketed by William Morris. Children toys and kitchen utensils were often made out of lead and the highly corrosive carbolic acid was used in cleaning products.

Death was becoming a lucrative business. When a loved one died, all the mirrors in the house were covered by a dark veil to prevent the spirit of the deceased of being trapped in one of them. If a mirror fell or broke, it was believed that another member of the family would shortly die. All the clocks were stopped at the hour of death to keep bad luck at bay. The body would usually be kept in the house until all the funeral preparations were complete.

Although pompous ceremonies were



RUDYARD KIPLING





"Till time shall cease:
Sleep that no pain shall wake;
Night that no morn shall break
Till joy shall overtake
Her perfect peace."

Dante Gabriel Rossetti



considered undignified, a lavish funeral would signify that the deceased was a person of comfortable means. Even the poorer classes would ensure to give their loved ones a decent burial and send them to meet the maker in clean and respectable attire.

The Undertaker would manage every aspect of the funeral. He worked in collaboration with coffin and gravestone makers and would provide the hearse and horses for the procession. The number of ostrich feather-plumed horses would determine the status of the deceased and their family. So it was the case for ornate gravestones and elegantly padded coffins that granted a peaceful eternal rest. If the attendance at a funeral was expected to be meagre, professional mourners or "Mutes" could be hired to look grave, and lament the loss of the departed.

BLACK IS THE NEW MAGENTA

Department stores and catalogue companies that specialised in the death trade would ensure to meet the ever increasing demand for "Mournicalia".

Black furniture, jewellery, accessories and clothing were all sought after items.

Jay's Mourning Warehouse of Regent Street, a dressmaker and milliner, provided valuable advice on strict mourning etiquette.

When entering deep mourning, vivid bright colours were shunned and a widow was required to wear her black "Widow's Weeds" for a year and a day. The material used for deep mourning was crepe or bombazine, a non-reflective black fabric that could not be embroidered, giving the wearer a respectable and grave appearance. A bonnet and dark veil were also part of a lady's attire.

At the time half mourning was adopted, lighter colours like grey, mauve, lilac, and white were acceptable and less restrictive fabrics could be worn.

Wearing jewellery during deep mourning was

considered inappropriate and extravagant. The only exception to the rule was jet (lignite), a fossilised predecessor of coal.

The sombre and understated quality of this semi-precious stone made it the ideal choice for dignified widows.

The finest jet derived from Whitby on the Yorkshire coast and was popularised by Queen Victoria.

MACABRE MEMORABILIA

The increased mortality rate meant that the Victorian population had to find ways to cope with their grief and mourn their departed. After the invention of the daguerreotype in 1839, photography as opposed to painted portraits became the affordable option of preserving the likeness of your loved ones.

It was not customary for the poor to commission images of infants or children in life. After they died however, their likeness will almost always be taken to commemorate their brief existence on earth.

The Carte de Visite was a greeting card that could be produced in multiple prints, so that the photograph of the dead child could be sent to the extended family and friends. Photographic studios were asked to portray the dead body with a lifelike expression. The little corpse was placed on a chair with the eyes propped open. Most dead sitters were holding flowers or toys and were often surrounded by the proximate family. After taking the image, the photograph was enhanced by adding pupils, blushing cheeks and rosy lips. Some children were shown laying on a bed of roses or in their own coffin and portrayed as innocent sleeping angels.

One other macabre ritual was to wear a piece of jewellery that contained human hair. The hair of the departed was cut off and fashioned into a discrete medallion or brooch, but also into large and intricate bracelets, buckles, chains or ornate hair nets.

MESSAGES FROM THE OTHER SIDE

The overwhelming desires to re-establish a contact with the soul of a dearly departed opened a niche for a new emerging trade - Spiritualism.

Charlatans would prey upon impressionable individuals and use tricks and mesmerisms to make them hear or sometimes see the spirits of their deceased family members. Florence Cook, an estimated London medium, was famous for her "lively" séances and would use special effects like materialisation, table turning, ghost

writing, disembodied voices and levitation as her repertoire.

The year the Prince Consort died, a teenage boy from Leicester, who was present at his family séance, passed a message from Albert to the Queen in which he called her by the pet name known only to the couple. The craze spread almost instantly and several Spiritualist societies were formed, producing their own pamphlets and journals. Contributions came from famous society members like Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of Sherlock Holmes



and the female poet Elisabeth Barrett Browning.

The expression "Memento Mori" (Latin for: remember that you will die) was constantly present in Victorian life. Skulls appeared on magazine covers, ghost literature, coffin engravings and even jewellery. One of the most visited shows in London was the Phantasmagoria, a cautionary tale dramatization that used slides to project deadly apparitions for the amusement of the audience.

The fascination with death became a morbid obsession.

COFFIN ALARMS AND RESURRECTIONISTS

Medical science was still fairly experimental and a state of deep coma could very easily be mistaken for death, especially in poorer areas where unqualified doctors or "Quacks" would be called to assist the patient.

The terror of being buried alive was so widely spread that a new device "a coffin alarm" appeared on the market.

A string or chain with a bell at its end would be attached to the ring placed on the finger of the deceased and connected to the headstone.

Should the cadaver suddenly awake, the "dead ringer" would literally be saved by the bell. Body snatchers, who would dig up a freshly buried corpse and sell it to medical schools for anatomy lessons, frequently disturbed the peace of the graveyard. In order to procure the bodies faster, the vicious Burke and Hare from Edinburgh even resorted to killing poor unsuspecting members of the public.

DESPERATE ROMANTICS

One of the saddest stories ever told is the sorry tale of Elizabeth Siddal.

Lizzie was the first Pre-Raphaelite muse and the model for Sir John Everett Millais' "Ophelia".

While posing for Ophelia, she was asked to lay in a bath of hot water. After several hours the water cooled down to a chilling degree and

Lizzie lost her senses and almost drowned. She survived, but was plagued by lung disease for the rest of her short life. To soften her physical pain and numb the sorrows caused by her husband Dante Gabriel Rossetti's infidelity, Lizzie became a Laudanum addict. On a dark winter's night she took a fatal dose and died shortly after. As an ultimate romantic gesture Rossetti buried his unfortunate bride holding a manuscript of original selected poems.

Seven years after Elizabeth's death, Rossetti was eager to retrieve the manuscript, publish the poems and dedicate them to his current lover and muse - Jane Morris. Lizzie's corpse was exhumed and according to an eyewitness, the body was perfectly preserved. Her flowing titian hair had kept growing and filled the coffin.

FAITHFUL INTO DEATH

The most famous canine mourner of all time is Greyfriars Bobby. This tiny Skye Terrier kept a vigil at his master's grave until its own death 14 years later. He became Edinburgh's mascot and a much-loved presence at Greyfriars cemetery, where locals fed him and looked after him.

Bobby's tale was popularised by cinema and his bronze statue can still be found opposite the churchyard.

Another peculiar story is that of a Sydney jilted bride Eliza Donnithorne, who was abandoned by her groom on their wedding day. Eliza spent the rest of her life in a dark room with her rotting wedding cake and her door left ajar in case her beloved groom changed his mind. It is believed that Dickens based the character of Miss Havisham on this unfortunate girl.

In 1901 Queen Victoria was dying. After 40 years of wearing black and pining for her lost love, the Widow of Windsor's mortal remains were covered in her wedding veil.

She was finally ready to be reunited with her darling Albert.