

BELIEFS REGARDING DEATH.

In reading the communication in *Folk-Lore*, xxxi., p. 154, by Mr. J. W. Halton, about "Beliefs regarding Death in Cumberland," I see that he remarks that he has never noticed the plate of salt placed on one breast of a dead woman, though it is a common practice in regard to a dead man. It might, perhaps, interest Mr. Halton and others to know that I can, as a small child, clearly remember an instance where this singular rite was performed on the body of a woman.

My father, the **Rev. G. W. Berkeley**, then vicar of Butleigh, Somerset, himself saw a plateful of salt on the breast of a very old woman, by name "**Mary Anne Talbot**," one of his parishioners. He was ignorant of the significance of the custom; but I believe that the dead woman's daughter explained that the salt was put there "to scare the Devil away." Mrs. Talbot died about twenty or five-and-twenty years ago, and I have not heard of another instance among the people of Butleigh, though doubtless there were others. I have heard that in the neighbouring parish of Kingweston a plate of salt was placed on the chest of a man who died of pneumonia. His family charged the vicar's wife with his death, as she had insisted on his bed being moved out of the draught. The only other place where it could stand was under a cross-beam, and it was believed fatal for a sick person to lie under such a beam.

As to the *raison d'être* of the plate of salt, I have heard it suggested that it is connected with sin-eating, and is the final preparation for the visit of the Sin-eater. Sir G. L. Gomme confirms this in *Ethnology in Folk-Lore*, where (p. 118) he quotes from Napier's *Folk-Lore of the West of Scotland*, where the Sin-eater is described as eating salt and bread from a plate set on the chest of the corpse. I do not know whether one can infer from this that sin-eating was ever in vogue among the Somerset folk as late as 1895 or thereabouts; it seems more likely that the custom is merely a survival.

Another strange superstition concerning death, still prevalent among the people of Butleigh, is that the striking of the church clock during the singing of a hymn foretold a death within the week. Curiously enough the coincidence occurred quite often enough to impress the fact on the local mind, and I have often seen the congregation turn horrified faces on each other when the clock struck during a hymn. So far as I can gather, this is not a very widely spread belief in Somerset, but is local to one or two places. I have not come across it in Dorset, though I believe it is not quite unknown in the Eastern Counties. I should be glad if any readers of *Folk-Lore* could quote parallel instances, or throw any light upon the origin or meaning of the belief.

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Extracted from the journal "Folklore" Vol.34, No. 2, June 30th 1923 pp.164/6