

THE DANCES OF DEATH.

BY THE EDITOR.

NEVER is the consideration of the problem of death so appropriate as at the change of the year, for the transition from the past to the future, the passing out of the old year and the entering in of the new year are phases in the lapse of time which are anal-

ogous to death and birth. And nothing teaches us so plainly that there is no death: what seems so is transition. We enter into the future life, that is to say, we build up a new existence while we live. Our life's activity is a forming, a giving shape to that form of life which we shall be after death; and thus we enter into life eternal in the fleeting hours of transiency itself.

Our last article on death treated the Christian conception in contrast to the classic ideas that prevailed in Greece and Rome. We shall now briefly discuss the so-called Dances of



THE ARTIST.

(Probably Hans Hug Kluber.) Death grinding his colors.

Death in which the Christian conception of death reaches a certain perfection.

During the times of war and pestilence so frequent in the Middle Ages, the people endeavored to accustom themselves to the sight of death in its ugliest appearances and most insidious forms. In the human palm the main lines form the figure of an



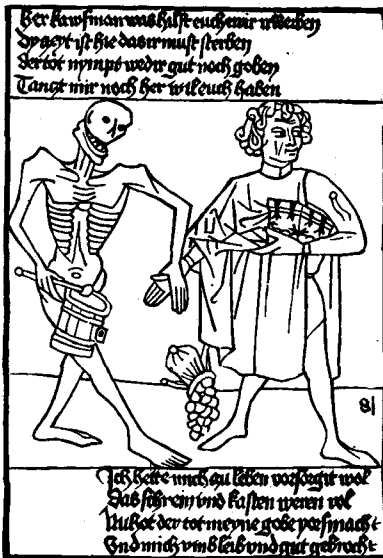
THE POPE.



THE KING.



THE LADY.



THE MERCHANT.

Woodcuts of the fifteenth century. (Reproduced from Massmann after the Heidelberg copy, the only one in existence.)

M, and these two M's, one in each hand, were interpreted to mean *Memento Mori*, Remember that thou must die.

One of the most impressive Latin church hymns begins with the words :

"*Media in vita nos in morte sumus.*"

[In the Middle of life we are surrounded by death.]



THE DUCHESS IN THE DANCE OF DEATH AT GROSS-BASEL.

Showing the reluctance to follow Death. (After a copper engraving of Peter Vischer.)

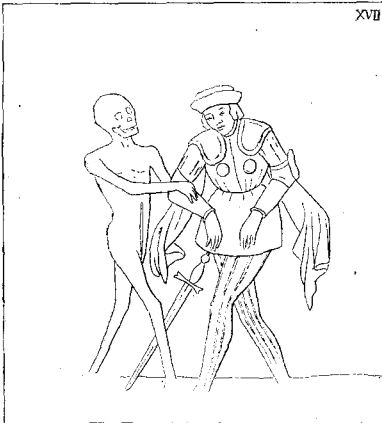
Death was so omnipresent to the people of those days that they began to represent life as a dance of death. Death leads his blind dupes to an untimely grave; he plays the fiddle at the wedding, he beats the drum for the soldiers in battle, he carries the priest's bell when he visits those who hunger for the sacrament, etc.



THE POPE. (Gross-Basel.)



THE DUCHESS. (Gross-Basel.)



(Klein-Basel.) THE KNIGHT.



(Gross-Basel.)



(Klein-Basel.)

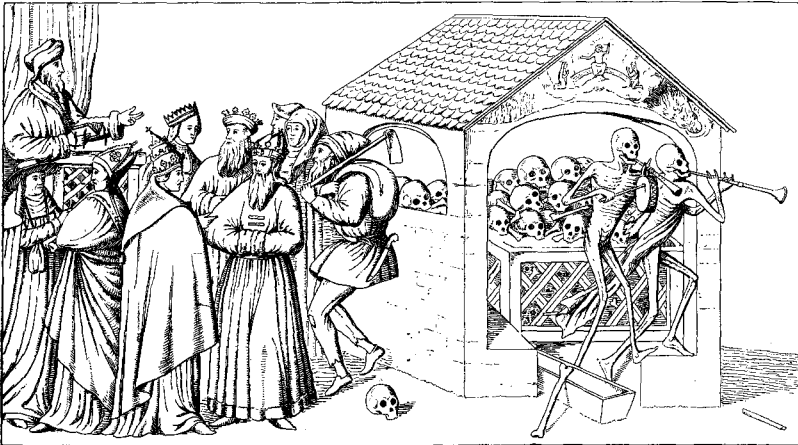
THE VIRGIN.



(Gross-Basel.)

The earliest Dances of Death of which we know are the famous wall-pictures of the old nunnery at Klingenthal in Klein Basel, which were reproduced on the wall of a cemetery in Gross Basel and in other Swiss cities. In addition there is a copy of woodcuts of the fifteenth century preserved in the Heidelberg library which is an evidence that the representation of death as a dance with a decaying human figure, allegorising the dissolution of the body, was at that time a favorite method of intensifying religious edification.

The pictures of the Dance of Death at Basel suggested to Hans Holbein the idea of treating the same subject in a series of woodcuts, which in book-form with explanatory verses were published



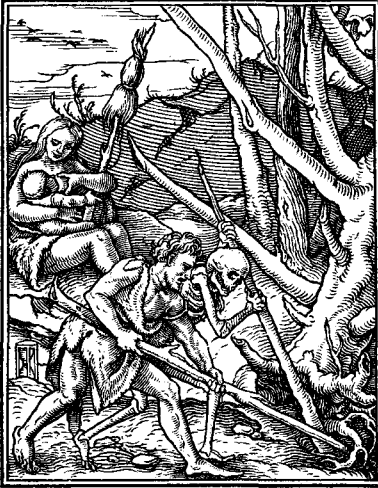
THE LESSON OF THE CHARNEL HOUSE. (Gross-Basel.)

for the first time by Melchior and Gaspar Trechsel in 1538. And how timely was the work! In 1554 the plague swept over Europe and the artist himself fell a victim to the terrible disease. His "Dance of Death," however, became the most famous work of his life, appearing in many hundred editions in French, Latin, Italian, and German.¹ It may be considered as the classical representation of the Christian conception of Death.

The artistic value of the various Dances of Death is greater than at first sight might appear to those who are not initiated into the history of art. They are not productions of an isolated individual but represent the spirit of the age. A comparison of the

¹The original bears the title '*Les Simulachres et Historiees faces de la Mort avant enle gammet pourtraictes, que artificiellement imaginées. A Lyon Soubz l'escu de Coloigne M.D.XXXVIII. 4.*

various Dances of Death shows at a glance how faithfully even the details of certain traditional attitudes are preserved. The Heidel-



THE CURSE OF GENESIS III. 17.



THE MISER.



THE PRIEST.



THE PHYSICIAN.

Death-dances of Holbein.

berg woodcuts exhibit a remarkable strength in their expressive lines which is not lost in the later treatments of the same subjects.

How lovingly the artist painted the wall-pictures of Gross-Basel may be learned from a copper engraving of Peter Vischer which



THE WEARY.



DRUNKARDS.



THE LAST JUDGMENT.



DEATH'S COAT OF ARMS.
With the artist and his wife as supporters.
Death-dances of Holbein.

reproduces the figure of the duchess in its more minute details. The Christian spirit of contemplating death found another ar-



THE ORIGIN OF DEATH.



LIFE IS A PILGRIMAGE.



MORE POWERFUL THAN THE POPE.



OUTWEIGHING THE BISHOP'S HAT.

Abraham a Sancta-Clara's Death Chapel.

tistic expression in the copper engravings of Christoph Weigel. Holbein was a Protestant and he was a master whose earnestness is recognisable in every line of his drastic life. Holbein himself knew the dangers that lurk in the allurements of life, and represented them realistically and faithfully. Weigel was a Catholic and he was inspired by Abraham a Sancta-Clara—a man of extraordinary genius and saintly devotion, who suggested to the artist his thoughts at the moment when he himself, the preacher and example of his congregation, was facing death.



THE PIPER AT THE DANCE.

Abraham a Sancta-Clara's Death Chapel.



THE WEALTHY.

Abraham a Sancta-Clara was born July 4th, 1642, of honest but poor parents in Greenstetten, a Swabian village. He joined in his twentieth year the order of St. Augustine at Marienbrunn, Austria, and became soon celebrated as a preacher who possessed the rare quality of telling the truth fearlessly and with good humor. When the good Emperor Leopold heard of this wonderful gift, he engaged the Augustine friar as *Hofprediger* or Court-chaplain, expressing an earnest desire that he might frankly tell the truth to his courtiers. Fame and honors now came to Abraham without his seeking. He became a Doctor of Theology and the highest aristocracy of Austria thronged to the church of Sancta-Clara to hear him.



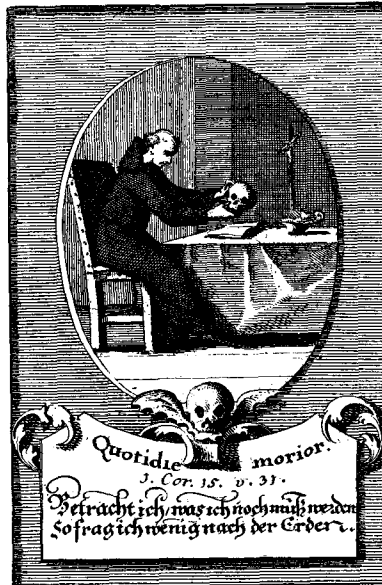
THE HUNTER'S HUNTER.



THE GAMBLER WHO ALWAYS WINS IN
THE END.



THE EPIDEMIC.



TRANSIENCY.

Abraham a Sancta-Clara's Death Chapel.

Abraham's first work, the *Grammatica religiosa*, exhibits both learnedness and genius. His next work, *Merk's, Wien* (Mind it, Vienna!), praises God's providence for having rescued Vienna from the Turks. The homily *Lösch, Wien* (Quench, Vienna!) exhorts the survivors of the pest to quench with tears of repentance the flames of the purgatory in which the souls of the deceased suffer. Other writings of his are *Huy und Pfuy*, *Etwas für Alle*, *Misch Masch*, *Geistlicher Kramladen*, etc. Once he imitated a cackling hen and made it the theme of a pious sermon. In his last illness



THE PRISONER SET FREE.



THE SCHOLAR'S LABORS ENDED.

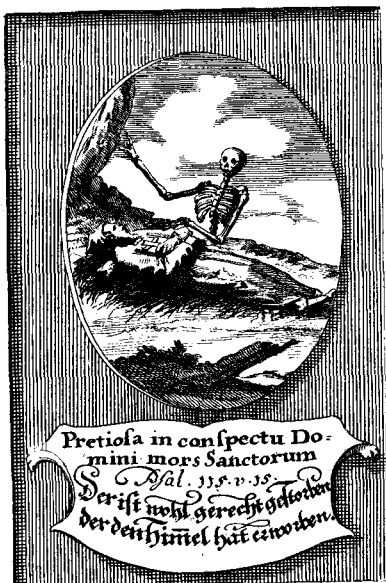
Abraham a Sancta-Clara's *Death Chapel*.

he wrote the homily on "the well-filled wine-cellar," meaning thereby the religious cordials which were at his disposal. In his anxiety to be useful to his parishioners and the world at large even while facing death, he had the chapel at Loretto in Vienna decorated with illustrations of the vanity of life.

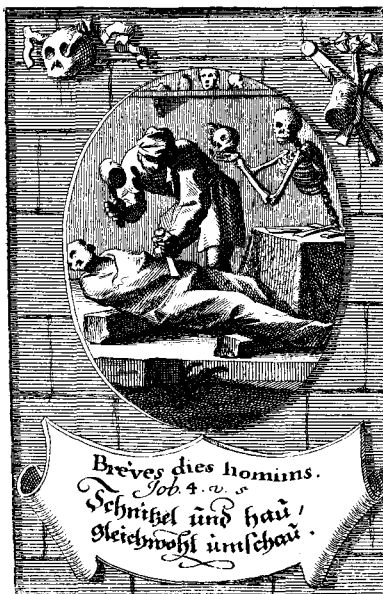
Abraham died December 1st, 1709, and his musings on Death, together with Weigel's copper prints, appeared in 1710. Although we must assume that they were a source of edification for many people, they became not so well known as Holbein's drawings, for the book remained limited to the Roman Catholic countries of Ger-



THE BABY.



THE HERMIT.



THE SCULPTOR.



THE PAINTER.

Abraham a Sancta-Clara's *Death Dance*.



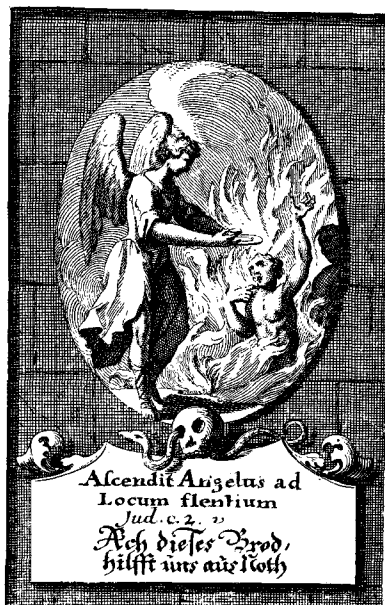
THE SUFFERINGS IN PURGATORY.



IN THE FLAMES OF HELL



THE EFFICACY OF ALMSGIVING.



THE POTENCY OF THE EUCHARIST.

Abraham a Sancta-Clara's Death Chapel,

many. Nor were they ever, so far as I know, published in English or other foreign tongues. That the circulation of the *Death Chapel* remained so much behind Holbein's Dance of Death is mainly due to a change of taste which slowly began to make itself felt when, in imitation of the Greeks, people shrunk again from contemplating death in its terrible features.



THE POWER OF THE ROSARY.



THE QUICKEST RIDER.

Abraham a Sancta-Clara's *Death Dance*.

Weigel's pictures, or we might as well say, Abraham a Sancta-Clara's pictures, are truly Christian in their sentiment and show perhaps even a closer relationship to the Buddhist idea of the vanity of life than even Holbein's drawings. However that may be, they are typically Roman Catholic and betray the Roman conception of the efficiency of masses, prayers, and the sacrament for ransoming the suffering souls from the tortures of purgatory.