THE SKELETON AS A REPRESENTATION OF DEATH AND THE DEAD.

BY THE EDITOR.

HAVING published a series of articles on the Dances of Death in former numbers of *The Open Court*, it is but natural that I take a lively interest in Mr. Laufer's theory of the "Origin of Our Dances of Death." The details of his exposition reveal some strange customs of Tibetan Buddhism, but for all that I can not accept his main proposition that "in this (the Tibetan skeleton dance) we have doubtless to see the prototype of our Dances of Death."

Now I grant that Buddhist views, doctrines, fables, parables and stories have traveled West and we can still trace the way taken by the story of Bodhisat, for instance, while it was changed into the Christian legend of Barlaam and Josaphat. We know that Æsop's fables must have come from India, and the mystery play "Everybody" is obviously retold from a Buddhist parable. In the Indian story a man is summoned before a stern judge, and is forsaken by his wealth, his friends, and his family; only his good deeds accompany him to the court and there speak for him so as to effect his acquittal. But we have good evidence for all these cases, and the remarkable agreement of some special detail renders unquestionable the connection of the Christian form of the legends with their Buddhist prototype. As to the Death Dances however it would be difficult to prove how and when their conception was transferred from the interior of Asia into Europe. Moreover the similarity between the two views is by no means so striking as Mr. Laufer regards it.

First we must consider that in the Christian Death dances, Death is represented as a skeleton and what is called the "dance" of Death is simply his sudden appearance among men, when he comes to lead away the high and the lowly, the rich and the poor, the king or pope and the beggar, the soldier, the hunter, the physician,—anybody and everybody without exception.
In the center stand the conjurer with the black hat and the white man, who is called the Spirit of the Earth. Next to these stand the stag and bull-headed demon, while the figures at the ends are of a nondescript character. The small figure at the extreme right is one of the eight companions of Dharmpala.

*From Grünwedel's Mythologie.*
There is no Tibetan representation of Death in the shape of a skeleton. Death is Yama, and the god Yama is never represented as a skeleton. Yama has a retinue of six figures: one with a stag's head, one with a bull's head, the white old man (being the spirit of the earth), the conjurer with the black hat, and two more figures with grim looking masks, each wearing a mirror on his breast and a wheel upon his stomach. In addition there are the eight followers of Dharmapala (the guardian of Buddhism) and also the two skeletons who serve as protectors of the cemetery. These skeletons take part in the dance and (as Mr. Laufer correctly tells us) drive off with their staves the bad raven who would snatch away the sacrifice.

Mr. Knight in his interesting book, *Where Three Empires Meet*, describes some of these Tibetan mysteries very minutely. The underlying thought is always obvious though it is frequently difficult to explain the special meaning of details. The intention of these plays is to impress the people with the power of religion which by ceremonies and exorcism is alone able to cope with the
evil influences that beset man in this life and hereafter. One scene is described as follows:

"The music became fast and furious, and troop after troop of different masks rushed on, some beating wooden tambourines, others swelling the din with rattles and bells. All of these masks were horrible, and the malice of infernal beings was well expressed on some of them. As they danced to the wild music with strange stens and gesticulations, they howled in savage chorus. The solemn chanting ceased, and then rushed on the scene a crowd of wan shapes, almost naked, with but a few rags about them. They wrung their hands despairingly, and rushed about in a confused way as if lost, starting from each other in terror when they met, sometimes feeling about them with their outstretched hands like blind men, and all the while whistling in long-drawn notes, which rose and fell like a strong wind on the hills, producing an indescribably dreary effect. These, I was told, represented the unfortunate souls of dead men which had been lost in space, and were vainly seeking their proper sphere through the darkness. The variously masked figures of Spirits of Evil flocked in, troop after troop—oxen-headed and serpent-headed devils; three-eyed monsters with projecting fangs, their heads crowned with tiaras of human skulls; Lamas painted and masked to represent skeletons; dragon-faced fiends, naked save for tiger-skins about their loins, and many others. Sometimes they appeared to be taunting and terrifying the stray souls of men—grim shapes who fled hither and thither among their tormentors, waving their arms and wailing miserably, souls who had not obtained Nirvana and yet who had no incarnation. Then the demons were repelled again by holy men; but no sooner did these last exorcise one hideous band than other crowds came shrieking on. It was a hopeless conflict. At one period of the ceremony a holy man. blessed a goblet of water by laying his hands on it and intoning some prayer or charm. Then he sprinkled the water in all directions, and the defeated demons stayed their shrieking, dancing, and infernal music, and gradually krep out of the arena, and no sound was heard for a time but the sweet singing of the holy choir."

The dance of the nine skeletons around a corpse (described by Dr. Laufer, p. 599) has no other significance than to show the power of religious exorcism, but while the protectors of the cemetery are on the side of the Buddhist priests and assist them in their beneficial work, the nine skeletons are hostile demons bent upon mischief and they must be prevented from doing any injury to the dead who are protected by the mystic means of salvation. These
skeletons are either ghosts or demons of decay, but they no more represent Yama, the god of Death, than do the two protectors of the graveyard.

The same is true of Vetalas who are spirits capable of reanimating dead bodies. Accordingly there is a marked difference between the Christian and the Tibetan Death dances. The former
ones, though called dances are not always dances, but simply illustrations of the innumerable ways of Death, and Death is represented in them as a skeleton. It is noteworthy that the dead are

THE DANCE OF THE NINE SKELETONS.
From Knight's Where Three Empires Meet.

never represented as skeletons in Christian art. When they rise from the grave, or are led to judgment, they are always clothed with flesh; they are naked but never reduced to bones only, while we have
reason to believe that the Tibetan skeletons are ghosts, or rather the reanimated remains of the dead. They may be good ghosts such as the protectors of the graveyard, or evil ones like the nine skeletons that try to injure the body of a new arrival at the realms of death.

**YAMA THE GOD OF DEATH AND HIS SISTER YAMI.**
In his right hand Yama swings a scepter with a skull on the top.

There are four Yamas, each one presiding over a realm of his own, for there are four regions of death situated in the four corners of the world, but never has any one of these Yamas been pictured
in the shape of a skeleton, and so we make bold to say that the Christian conception of the personification of death is quite different from the Tibetan view, and the Tibetan Death dances should more properly be called skeleton dances.

Mr. Laufer criticises Franz Xaver Kraus for holding "the idea that we must descend into classical antiquity... in order to explain the origin of our dance of Death," but I am under the impression that Mr. Laufer is mistaken, for Professor Kraus was much too conversant with the history of art to propound a view which had, by indirection at least, been so thoroughly refuted in Lessing's famous essay "How the Ancients Have Represented Death." Lessing shows that the ancients never represented Death as a skeleton, and it is impossible that Professor Kraus was not acquainted with Lessing's proof. In the passage referred to by Mr. Laufer, Professor Kraus only states that there are numerous passages in Greek and Roman authors which refer to Death as the one who will snatch away all of us. This same thought, he adds, is expressed in the poems of the Arabian poet Adi, and we find it in Mediaeval inscriptions. There is not a word anywhere in Kraus's "History of Christian Art" which can be construed to mean that we have to descend to classical antiquity for an explanation of the Christian Death dances. Mr. Laufer must have read the mooted passage (Kraus, Geschichte der christlichen Kunst, II. p. 450) somewhat carelessly, and if he reads it over again he will presumably change his view.

The poems of Goethe, Bürger and Zedlitz, in which skeletons are introduced, are quite modern and can not be quoted to support any theory. In one of his ballads Goethe makes the skeletons of the dead rise by midnight and perform a dance in the cemetery: Bürger tells how a dead soldier returns to his sweetheart and carries her away to the grave where he changes into a skeleton, and Zedlitz describes how the grenadiers of Napoleon reappear on the Champs Elisées as skeletons and parade before the Emperor. But these notions are isolated and can not be met with either in folklore or in Christian tradition. Mr. Laufer says:

"The orthodox Jewish Christian notion is that the corpse does not continue a material existence but that it will decay and crumble away into earth and dust. This notion is strongly contradicted by the whole conception of the dances of Death and of the dead, in which the moving power of the skeletons is implicitly presupposed, but not by any means accounted for. This shows that it must be a foreign, a borrowed idea in European Christianity."

Here we must protest. First, there are dances of Death but
nowhere in Christianity are there dances of the dead, for Goethe's poem of the dances of the skeletons must be ruled out. Further the idea that the body decays and does not take part in the resurrection is quite modern in Christianity. It is only in the last fifty years that Christians have emphasized the immortality of the soul. The old orthodox view is a belief in the resurrection of the flesh as it is most emphatically insisted on in the Apostolic confession of faith. St. Paul insists most plainly on the doctrine that some members of his congregation will remain alive till the end and they will be taken to heaven bodily while the dead will rise and join them.

The Church held on to this belief. Prudentius, for instance, says concerning the bones and dust of the dead:

"There will soon come a time when genial warmth shall revisit these bones, and the soul will resume its former tabernacle, animated with living blood. The inert corpses, long since corrupted in the tomb, shall be borne through the ether [auras], in company with the souls. For this reason is such care bestowed upon the sepulchre: such honor paid to the motionless limbs—such luxury displayed in funerals. We spread the linen cloth of spotless white—myrrh and frankincense embalm the body. What do these excavated rocks signify? What these fair monuments? What, but that the object intrusted to them is sleeping, and not dead.... But now death itself is blessed, since through its pangs a path is thrown open to the just, a way from sorrow to the stars.... We will adorn the hidden bones with violets and many a bough; and on the epitaph and the cold stones we will sprinkle liquid odors." (The Church in the Catacombs, by C. Maitland, pp. 45-46.)

And a Protestant German hymn of the time of the Reformation, still sung at German funerals, reads:

"With this very selfsame skin, I then enveloped be; God shall be beholden in this same body then by me. In this flesh then I shall see Jesus for eternity." "Dann wird eben diese Haut Mich umgeben, wie ich glaube. Gott wird werden angesehen Dann von mir in diesem Leibe; Und in diesem Fleisch werde ich Jesum sehen ewiglich."

The doctrine of Christ's bodily resurrection has always been regarded as a promise that all Christians will share the same fate and that they will rise again bodily from the grave.

Mr. Laufer is right in saying that the Christian conception of death has not been derived from classical antiquity and such skeletons as those represented on the silver cup of Boscoplace are not Death dances, but the skeletons of sages and poets who appear at
MARA'S ARMY.
Gandhara sculpture after a photograph.
a feast to give warning in the sense of Omar Khayyam's philosophy that now is the time to be merry, for soon the revelers too will be mere skeletons. It was an Egyptian habit to hand around at the feast a mummy with the exhortation to enjoy life while it lasts.

**GREEK SKELETON DANCE ON THE CUP OF BOSCOREALE.**

These skeletons accordingly have no connection with either the Tibetan skeleton dances, or with the Christian dances of Death. Dr. Laufer asserts that in the Gandhara sculptures there is a figure with a skull among the demons of Mara's army who are marching in hostile array against the Buddha seated under the Bodhi tree. He relies on a statement of Grünwedel who it may
THE MERRY SKELETONS.
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be granted is a good authority, and this if it were true would make
the skeleton an ancient Buddhist institution and fix the date of its
first appearance in India as early as in the second century before the
Christian era.

It would be interesting to have the ultimate origin of the intro-
duction of skeletons into religions art traced back to ancient India,
but Grünwedel’s statements is based upon an error.* When he
wrote the passage which Dr. Laufer has in mind he had before his
eyes a drawing in which the head of one of the demons (the second
from above in the first right-hand vertical row) somewhat resembles
a skull, but an inspection of a photograph of this same marble which
is here reproduced shows plainly that the mask in question repre-
sents the head of a brute, perhaps a dog, with a row of teeth in its
upper jaw like those of a shark. This being the only instance of its
kind, the idea that the demon skeleton is originally Buddhistic must
be regarded as disposed of. There is no reason to change the
theory that the Tibetan skeleton dances are Tibetan and pre-Bud-
dhistic, being a part of the old Shamanist institutions.

Mr. Laufer speaks of Kyosai’s skeletons as Death dances sug-
gesting that “the Japanese must have had a certain tradition relating
to it,” but I see in the mooted picture a mere freak of the artist’s
imagination which need not have any connection with the Tibetan
skeleton dances as it certainly has nothing to do with Goethe’s
ballad on a kindred theme.

The notions of death and of the dead, as well as the notions of
the soul and immortality, of heaven and hell, of God and of the
Devil, are very similar all over the world at definite stages of civiliza-
tion among races that otherwise differ in their languages, religions
and customs. Yet in their finer traits these conceptions vary greatly
and the differences show themselves mainly in typical artistic rep-
resentations. The belief that ghosts need food and drink for their
sustenance, that they are hungry, and must be fed, and further that
mere imaginary and purely painted food is sufficient to satisfy their
hunger is common to Egypt and Eastern Asia. Yet how different
are the pictures of Egyptian souls which are represented as human-
headed hawks, from Japanese disembodied spirits for instance, the
latter being marvelously uncanny and yet often very graceful. As
a most interesting instance we reproduce from Hokusai’s Mangwa
a picture which represents a Buddhist saint seated at a well from

*Grünwedel speaks of the first figure in the second horizontal row as
holding up a mask which he describes thus: “Die fast fleischlose Fratze, welche
offenbar als ein Todtenkopf gedacht ist, fletscht die Zähne.”
A JAPANESE GHOST.
By Hokusai.
whose depths the ghost of a drowned woman arises, imploring the holy man to save her soul and rescue her by the means of grace which religion offers. It is peculiar that Japanese ghosts are always pictured without feet.

While I do not deny that many notions of lamaistic Buddhism have been transferred to Christianity, I see no reason whatever to derive the Death dances of the Christian Middle Ages from the skeleton dances of Tibet. The Christian view of the dances of Death is so typically Mediæval and is so easily explained from the conditions of the age that there is no need of seeking for their origin in distant Tibet where, moreover, as we have seen, the similarity of its skeleton dances is only superficial, while their meaning is quite different.