

CHAPTER XXII--SUICIDE

With life so precarious, and opportunity for the happiness of life so remote, it is inevitable that life shall be cheap and suicide common. So common is it, that one cannot pick up a daily paper without running across it; while an attempt-at-suicide case in a police court excites no more interest than an ordinary "drunk," and is handled with the same rapidity and unconcern.

I remember such a case in the Thames Police Court. I pride myself that I have good eyes and ears, and a fair working knowledge of men and things; but I confess, as I stood in that court-room, that I was half bewildered by the amazing despatch with which drunks, disorderlies, vagrants, brawlers, wife-beaters, thieves, fences, gamblers, and women of the street went through the machine of justice. The dock stood in the centre of the court (where the light is best), and into it and out again stepped men, women, and children, in a stream as steady as the stream of sentences which fell from the magistrate's lips.

I was still pondering over a consumptive "fence" who had pleaded inability to work and necessity for supporting wife and children, and who had received a year at hard labour, when a young boy of about twenty appeared in the dock. "Alfred Freeman," I caught his name, but failed to catch the charge. A stout and motherly-looking woman bobbed up in the witness-box and began her testimony. Wife of the Britannia lock-keeper,

I learned she was. Time, night; a splash; she ran to the lock and found the prisoner in the water.

I flashed my gaze from her to him. So that was the charge, self-murder. He stood there dazed and unheeding, his bonny brown hair rumped down his forehead, his face haggard and careworn and boyish still.

"Yes, sir," the lock-keeper's wife was saying. "As fast as I pulled to get 'im out, 'e crawled back. Then I called for 'elp, and some workmen 'appened along, and we got 'im out and turned 'im over to the constable."

The magistrate complimented the woman on her muscular powers, and the court-room laughed; but all I could see was a boy on the threshold of life, passionately crawling to muddy death, and there was no laughter in it.

A man was now in the witness-box, testifying to the boy's good character and giving extenuating evidence. He was the boy's foreman, or had been. Alfred was a good boy, but he had had lots of trouble at home, money matters. And then his mother was sick. He was given to worrying, and he worried over it till he laid himself out and wasn't fit for work. He (the foreman), for the sake of his own reputation, the boy's work being bad, had been forced to ask him to resign.

"Anything to say?" the magistrate demanded abruptly.

The boy in the dock mumbled something indistinctly. He was still dazed.

"What does he say, constable?" the magistrate asked impatiently.

The stalwart man in blue bent his ear to the prisoner's lips, and then replied loudly, "He says he's very sorry, your Worship."

"Remanded," said his Worship; and the next case was under way, the first witness already engaged in taking the oath. The boy, dazed and unheeding, passed out with the jailer. That was all, five minutes from start to finish; and two hulking brutes in the dock were trying strenuously to shift the responsibility of the possession of a stolen fishing-pole, worth probably ten cents.

The chief trouble with these poor folk is that they do not know how to commit suicide, and usually have to make two or three attempts before they succeed. This, very naturally, is a horrid nuisance to the constables and magistrates, and gives them no end of trouble. Sometimes, however, the magistrates are frankly outspoken about the matter, and censure the prisoners for the slackness of their attempts. For instance Mr. R. S---, chairman of the S--- B--- magistrates, in the case the other day of Ann Wood, who tried to make away with herself in the canal: "If you wanted to do it, why didn't you do it and get it done with?" demanded the indignant Mr. R. S---. "Why did you not get under the water and make an end of it, instead of giving us all this trouble and bother?"

Poverty, misery, and fear of the workhouse, are the principal causes of suicide among the working classes. "I'll drown myself before I go into the workhouse," said Ellen Hughes Hunt, aged fifty-two. Last Wednesday they held an inquest on her body at Shoreditch. Her husband came from the Islington Workhouse to testify. He had been a cheesemonger, but failure in business and poverty had driven him into the workhouse, whither his wife had refused to accompany him.

She was last seen at one in the morning. Three hours later her hat and jacket were found on the towing path by the Regent's Canal, and later her body was fished from the water. Verdict: Suicide during temporary insanity.

Such verdicts are crimes against truth. The Law is a lie, and through it men lie most shamelessly. For instance, a disgraced woman, forsaken and spat upon by kith and kin, doses herself and her baby with laudanum. The baby dies; but she pulls through after a few weeks in hospital, is charged with murder, convicted, and sentenced to ten years' penal servitude. Recovering, the Law holds her responsible for her actions; yet, had she died, the same Law would have rendered a verdict of temporary insanity.

Now, considering the case of Ellen Hughes Hunt, it is as fair and logical to say that her husband was suffering from temporary insanity when he went into the Islington Workhouse, as it is to say that she was suffering from temporary insanity when she went into the Regent's Canal. As to

which is the preferable sojourning place is a matter of opinion, of intellectual judgment. I, for one, from what I know of canals and workhouses, should choose the canal, were I in a similar position. And I make bold to contend that I am no more insane than Ellen Hughes Hunt, her husband, and the rest of the human herd.

Man no longer follows instinct with the old natural fidelity. He has developed into a reasoning creature, and can intellectually cling to life or discard life just as life happens to promise great pleasure or pain. I dare to assert that Ellen Hughes Hunt, defrauded and bilked of all the joys of life which fifty-two years' service in the world has earned, with nothing but the horrors of the workhouse before her, was very rational and level-headed when she elected to jump into the canal. And I dare to assert, further, that the jury had done a wiser thing to bring in a verdict charging society with temporary insanity for allowing Ellen Hughes Hunt to be defrauded and bilked of all the joys of life which fifty-two years' service in the world had earned.

Temporary insanity! Oh, these cursed phrases, these lies of language, under which people with meat in their bellies and whole shirts on their backs shelter themselves, and evade the responsibility of their brothers and sisters, empty of belly and without whole shirts on their backs.

From one issue of the Observer, an East End paper, I quote the following commonplace events:-

A ship's fireman, named Johnny King, was charged with attempting to commit suicide. On Wednesday defendant went to Bow Police Station and stated that he had swallowed a quantity of phosphor paste, as he was hard up and unable to obtain work. King was taken inside and an emetic administered, when he vomited up a quantity of the poison. Defendant now said he was very sorry. Although he had sixteen years' good character, he was unable to obtain work of any kind. Mr. Dickinson had defendant put back for the court missionary to see him.

Timothy Warner, thirty-two, was remanded for a similar offence. He jumped off Limehouse Pier, and when rescued, said, "I intended to do it."

A decent-looking young woman, named Ellen Gray, was remanded on a charge of attempting to commit suicide. About half-past eight on Sunday morning Constable 834 K found defendant lying in a doorway in Benworth Street, and she was in a very drowsy condition. She was holding an empty bottle in one hand, and stated that some two or three hours previously she had swallowed a quantity of laudanum. As she was evidently very ill, the divisional surgeon was sent for, and having administered some coffee, ordered that she was to be kept awake. When defendant was charged, she stated that the reason why she attempted to take her life was she had neither home nor friends.

I do not say that all people who commit suicide are sane, no more than I say that all people who do not commit suicide are sane. Insecurity of

food and shelter, by the way, is a great cause of insanity among the living. Costermongers, hawkers, and pedlars, a class of workers who live from hand to mouth more than those of any other class, form the highest percentage of those in the lunatic asylums. Among the males each year, 26.9 per 10,000 go insane, and among the women, 36.9. On the other hand, of soldiers, who are at least sure of food and shelter, 13 per 10,000 go insane; and of farmers and graziers, only 5.1. So a coster is twice as likely to lose his reason as a soldier, and five times as likely as a farmer.

Misfortune and misery are very potent in turning people's heads, and drive one person to the lunatic asylum, and another to the morgue or the gallows. When the thing happens, and the father and husband, for all of his love for wife and children and his willingness to work, can get no work to do, it is a simple matter for his reason to totter and the light within his brain go out. And it is especially simple when it is taken into consideration that his body is ravaged by innutrition and disease, in addition to his soul being torn by the sight of his suffering wife and little ones.

"He is a good-looking man, with a mass of black hair, dark, expressive eyes, delicately chiselled nose and chin, and wavy, fair moustache." This is the reporter's description of Frank Cavilla as he stood in court, this dreary month of September, "dressed in a much worn grey suit, and wearing no collar."

Frank Cavilla lived and worked as a house decorator in London. He is described as a good workman, a steady fellow, and not given to drink, while all his neighbours unite in testifying that he was a gentle and affectionate husband and father.

His wife, Hannah Cavilla, was a big, handsome, light-hearted woman. She saw to it that his children were sent neat and clean (the neighbours all remarked the fact) to the Childeric Road Board School. And so, with such a man, so blessed, working steadily and living temperately, all went well, and the goose hung high.

Then the thing happened. He worked for a Mr. Beck, builder, and lived in one of his master's houses in Trundley Road. Mr. Beck was thrown from his trap and killed. The thing was an unruly horse, and, as I say, it happened. Cavilla had to seek fresh employment and find another house.

This occurred eighteen months ago. For eighteen months he fought the big fight. He got rooms in a little house in Batavia Road, but could not make both ends meet. Steady work could not be obtained. He struggled manfully at casual employment of all sorts, his wife and four children starving before his eyes. He starved himself, and grew weak, and fell ill. This was three months ago, and then there was absolutely no food at all. They made no complaint, spoke no word; but poor folk know. The housewives of Batavia Road sent them food, but so respectable were the Cavillas that the food was sent anonymously, mysteriously, so as not to hurt their pride.

The thing had happened. He had fought, and starved, and suffered for eighteen months. He got up one September morning, early. He opened his pocket-knife. He cut the throat of his wife, Hannah Cavilla, aged thirty-three. He cut the throat of his first-born, Frank, aged twelve. He cut the throat of his son, Walter, aged eight. He cut the throat of his daughter, Nellie, aged four. He cut the throat of his youngest-born, Ernest, aged sixteen months. Then he watched beside the dead all day until the evening, when the police came, and he told them to put a penny in the slot of the gas-meter in order that they might have light to see.

Frank Cavilla stood in court, dressed in a much worn grey suit, and wearing no collar. He was a good-looking man, with a mass of black hair, dark, expressive eyes, delicately chiselled nose and chin, and wavy, fair moustache.