

The Case of Suicide

BY HENRY MORTON ROBINSON

Is there any solution?

TO ONE in health, surrounded by family and friends, and upheld by that mysterious inner buoyancy which floats men over the ledges of despair, it seems incredible that the rich ichor of life should be spilled by one's own hand. Fortunately, most men are so constructed that adversity can be weathered, illness discounted, ignominy out-faced — all without recourse to that final act of despair. Yet for a growing number of persons — the suicide rate has nearly doubled in the United States since 1918 — voluntary self-destruction has seemed the only answer to the crushing riddle of existence.

Despite our democratic shibboleths, all suicides are not equally important. When, for example, an obscure piece of human wreckage crawls into his lodging-house room and turns on the gas, no one, not even the lodging-house keeper, is greatly exercised. These broken hulls of humanity present no inscrutable problem for our solution; the only wonder is that more of them, millions more, don't sink precipitately to the same wretched bottom. Nor do the judicious grieve when incurables, inexorably fated, shorten their

sentence by invoking the mercy of self-inflicted death. Before these private tribunals of misery no sensitive advocate would plead for an extension of the life term. But when persons of wealth, talent and some portion of bodily vigor, young or comparatively young, favored by society and frequently a very source of power and influence in that society — when such persons decide that life has nothing more to offer them and coolly proceed to slit its tedious thread, then we are forced to regard suicide, and the life it intercepts, as phenomena demanding our most searching analysis.

It has been suggested that we are entering upon an era, not unlike similar periods in Roman and Japanese history, in which suicide will be considered as a fitting conclusion to an honorable career. There is, however, at least one notable difference between our contemporary suicides and those of classic Roman and Oriental times. The suicide of a Roman general or senator was usually performed as an act of public duty, dedicated to the civil good and comparable to the retirement of a British Premier who can no longer muster a supporting majority in

Parliament. It was merely a political stepping down, accompanied by an effective pledge that there would be no stepping back. Hara-kiri, formerly practised by the Samurai order in Japan, was an act of self-obliteration in embarrassing official crises, and was also prescribed as the only recourse in cases of real or fancied disgrace. It certainly cleared the scene. If the Samurai code existed in America today, Tammany Hall would be a catacomb of self-slain heroes.

But civic exigency does not rank high among the causes of contemporary suicide. No, for suicide has become a strictly private affair, the end-all and forget-all of a peculiarly modern disease. That disease — of which the chief symptom is a bewildered sense of loss, loneliness and personal defeat — is worth investigating as the psychic cancer of our age. For through its broken tissues not only suicide but insanity and crime enter the body of society like a destructive rust.

SINCE the day when Petrarch stood on tiptoe on a little hill and discovered that his emotions about an earthly landscape were more exciting than the contemplation of a heavenly one, man has been busy transferring the centre of importance from the next world to this, and from the general group — the guild, the Church, the tradition — to his own specific soul. In this process of transfer he has picked up the germs of a psychic malady which, under various guises, is now endemic in the world. This psychic malady, taking such recognizable forms as autobiographic novels and the chiseling of

architects' names on corner-stones (who knows the architect of Rheims or Chartres?) can flourish only in a world that assumes the individual to be the important thing, hymns his particular worries and glories, records his loves and failures in love and encourages him generally to exalt his horn among men.

The exaltation of that horn is the history of Western individualism. The Renaissance, having established the fact that every journeyman tinker was a creature of marvelous potential sensibility, proceeded to put a value on his reactions to life. The Reformation turned the same journeyman into a hearth-stone theologian and urged him to formulate private judgments on such hitherto injudicable matters as God's ways to man. An accessible press inspired him to write pamphlets, and what's more, sign his own name to them. Political idealists lifted him to electoral heights and thus set individual theory adrift on chartless seas of political action. The Industrial Revolution showed him the way to possible wealth as the reward of private enterprise. It was all very exciting and wonderful — that is, until quite recently, when the alarming climb of the suicide and insanity rates began to indicate that the individualist tinker and his progeny were breaking down beneath their burden, and that a poisonous fever was churning in the modern bloodstream.

As a factual footnote to the familiar theory that suicide thrives where individualism prospers, the following figures may be of significance: Males, traditionally possessed of greater and more numerous individual outlets,

are four times more apt to commit suicide than females. Suicides among Protestants are more frequent than among dogmatically circumscribed Catholics. Italy, with an oppressive non-latitudinarian dictator, has a suicide rate of only ninety-two per million, while Germany, whirled in the dusty chaos of three dozen parties (1930) has a rate of 243. Literate persons in all countries, even though enjoying marked economic advantages, kill themselves in greater numbers proportionally, than their illiterate brethren. It is notoriously apparent that when education, leisure, and the other concomitants of a rich individualism are present, the suicide rate rises rapidly. That rate has been climbing steadily for the past fifty years; since 1870 the average number of suicides per million has trebled in Europe and America. In 1931 the United States had a suicide rate of 200 per million, which means that over 25,000 persons committed suicide in our country last year.

A solemn roll. Yet these figures, ominous as they are, need not be — or at least are not intended to be — an indictment of individualism. The crux of the matter lies elsewhere, and it is to the scrutiny of that fatal crux that we now proceed.

Briefly and bluntly, the trouble seems to be this: Man has assumed the outer forms of individualism without developing its inner props. He has gone far, but he has not gone far enough. In quest of psychic maturity he has left the cradle of the Church and has fled the roof of paternal authority; that he should do this, is as natural and as necessary as that a young man should leave his

father's house in search of economic and emotional independence. But it is an iron corollary of this departure that he should put away childish things — the myths, the dependencies and the illusions of infancy. If he fails or refuses to abandon them he is destroyed by the shearing pressure of adult realities; if he retains them, even partially, he is to that extent weakened in the struggle for possession of his own soul.

The insanity and suicides of our age proceed from a single cause: our failure or refusal to assume the stature of maturity, even while we make pitiful pretensions to its rights, exemptions and strength. It is as though a dwarf or a paralytic were to don the armor of a heroic knight; the burden of carrying those axe-proof plates would overtax the strength of any one but a true knight, and the pretender's collapse would be swift and fatal at the first onslaught of the foe.

It is customary nowadays to blame the economic depression for the increase in suicide. But the depression is the cause of suicide only in the way that the assassination of the Austrian Duke was the cause of the World War. The brooding elements of destruction in man or society await the flimsiest pretext to break loose, and then burst through the fissure of the nearest, most convenient reason. Actually, the cause of the present epidemic of suicide is not the depression, but the psychic greensickness of which the depression itself is but another symptom.

This emotional greensickness is a frustrated yearning for security from some quarter outside ourselves. Now the mature man knows that it

is presumptuous to expect security outside himself, yet humanly enough he finds himself in constant need of such security until he has ridden out the gales of adolescence. Most men never ride out that storm; to their last hour they are pitched and tossed by rollers of dependency — dependency on something or some one else — money, love, religion, *réclame* — on everything, in short, that can and does fail them, and will continue to fail them as long as they solicit their chief support from the outside. From the chagrin of repeated disappointment, most men learn in time to readjust themselves; but in so doing they develop horny integuments of fear that seal up the richest sources of life energy. Some few do actually progress to the point of psychic maturity, and, having gained the lonely peak, they learn to reconcile themselves to their isolation, saying with Marcus Aurelius, "Man must be arched and buttressed from within, else the temple wavers to the dust." But these, I repeat, are the few. Their opposites in temperament, weakened by a sentimental education begun at the moment of birth and unflaggingly echoed by school, pulpit and press, fall prey to obsessions of inadequacy, loneliness and dependency. Apparently they believe that mother-love, God's mercy, the social virtues and a sweetheart pal can or should support them in those sorrows and isolations which are the inescapable penalties of individualhood. Bewildered when they find out otherwise, these mock individuals cry out for love, aid, attention — anything to abate the insupportable load and loneliness of being a *person*. When

such support is not forthcoming they grow terrified, their psychic armor cracks open or they totter under its impost. As the disillusioning buffets rain upon them they become ill and sink progressively into the several stages of neurosis, the last of which is all too frequently self-destruction.

IT WAS not always so. There have been whole centuries, the Thirteenth for example, when the world was organized on a warmly maternal basis. When Mother Church and Mother Earth, those twin bountiful breasts of refuge, soothed and supplied the emotional needs of men; when unquestioning obedience to authority — the king, the priest, the guild — was the easy lot of man, *then* there were no suicides. There were no suicides because there were no stranded individuals squirming on the sharp sands of a defeated world. Men swam comfortably in the amniotic fluid of prenatal security and anonymity; as independent entities, they were not yet born; the warm peace of the womb lay upon them and all their psychic hungers were filled. They built cathedrals and composed prayers, and painted murals of the Mother and Son — the best cathedrals, prayers and murals that we know of, but their names or their troubles are not known to us. They were, happily, not individuals — and still more happily, had no desire to be.

If it were possible to return to that golden age of anonymity and infantile peace, of child-like faith and ready acquiescence to authority, I am certain that the suicide rate would drop to zero overnight. But time runs not back, and despite

the exhortations of well-intentioned shepherds it is as impossible to return to that security as to return to the comfort of a good cry at mother's knee. No, that is not the therapy, nor is it even the direction that the therapy must take. There can be no recession from the individual stand, however costly it is to hold. Such victory as men may win in the struggle for stability and happiness must be won on the difficult terrain where life meets the adult individual in unending conflict.

In that conflict our impedimenta of infantile illusion is a severe drain upon our strength. Exhausted by its burden we are unable to pick up the genuine freight of life and recoil from the greater task as one that will crush us if we attempt it. In our efforts to dodge the burden of ourselves we exhibit all the mistaken ingenuity of the schoolboy who spends long hours tracing notes on his fingernails so that he will not have to study for examination. We erect whole categories of false values to evade the examination of that single value, whatever it may be, which is truest for us. But all such pitiful evasion can not make up to us the lost sweetness of claiming our full stature. Rather, it aggravates our sense of what we are losing and makes our writhing gestures the bitterer because we realize at heart that they are utterly needless. Guilt, too, adds its corrosive drop when we discover that our yearning for infantile security is an illicit passion, unworthily fed. And so at last a darkening sense of futility and apathetic boredom overspreads our lives, oppresses the age and causes the poet to lament:

We are the hollow men
We are the stuffed men
Leaning together
Headpiece filled with straw, alas!

This anguish finds expression not only in the inevitable suicide note: "Life has neither meaning nor interest for me," but in the dragging days of ten million psychic invalids, potential suicides all, who still encumber the earth. It is too late to prescribe for such persons, and it is useless to suggest remedies to a society that does all it can to encourage them in their melancholia. But since optimism is concerned only with the future, may we not conceivably look ahead to the long pull upward from the slough of present despond?

There is no magic incantation over fire and water that will exorcise the demons of contemporary suicide, but there is always the slow fire of education to dissipate the damps of evil, with the hope that some day the hesitant smudge may burst into living flame. The education I speak of will go forward by a process of replacement and exchange. I will not say the replacement of illusion by reality, for illusion will always be a great motivator; and as for reality I make no claim to a monopoly of that ware. But if men are to stop killing themselves and our insane asylums are to be relieved of an intolerable pressure, the infantile fictions that drive men to suicide and madness must be skilfully displaced by mature realizations. The myth of a great and perfect romance fostered in a million novels, inflated by women's magazines and slobbered into the public ear over the radio must be replaced by the acceptance

of a hard-won, dearly-bought, hard-to-keep human relationship with a member of the opposite sex. The illusion that the winning of great wealth is not only easy but highly desirable, must be toned down to conformity with nickel-and-dime facts. The expectation of artistic recognition — a fruitful source of suicidal despair — must be supplanted by the pleasure of writing a poem or painting a picture for the relief it gives us — and in this world there are few poems or pictures worth much else anyway. The dependency upon praise and the fear of censure — heritages of childhood both — must be laid aside as “immaterial, incompetent and irrelevant,” having little to do with the tenor of one’s private way. And lastly, the childish fancy of a watchful Father that heeds even the sparrow’s fall must be reinterpreted for adulthood in terms of an impersonal, indifferent natural force that can not be swerved by intercession nor influenced by tears, sacrifice, or prayers.

But I hear hysterical voices warning against this systematic unpropping of mankind. “The risk,” they cry, “is too great. Remove the present supports of the spirit and man will straightway find himself groveling in the mire from which he rose.” To these, and all persons professionally or temperamentally determined to keep man on crutches, I reply that one does not develop biceps by carrying the arm in a splint nor by

leaning it against a pillar. It is true that religion has carried man far, but signs are not lacking that it can carry him no farther without seriously unfitting him for his own spiritual Odyssey, best guided by the bright particular star of his own choosing. For, from all indications, men are eager to get back on their “true original course” and strike out on the wine-dark sea of the future. It may well be that tempest and shipwreck will be their lot when they first start navigating for themselves, but I can not be convinced that their history while crawling in hobbles has been either safe or glorious. Or for that matter, particularly happy.

Suicide may put a quietus to the problems of one man, or twenty thousand, but it is no cure for the evil that gnaws at our society. Nor is there at present in the whole world any single instrumentality or device, outside man himself, which can quell that evil. Religion, once the hope and bulwark of man, has long ago lost its virtue as man’s ally in the struggle to possess his own soul. For religion has become, oddly enough, the rival of man in that very struggle. It would possess him, while if he is to live in health and security he must possess himself.

Theologians tell us that God’s infinite superiority to man consists chiefly in his complete self-sufficiency. Might we not take a shrewd hint from the theologians and profitably imitate, in our poor mortal way, the chief excellence of God?

Old Men

BY EUDORA RAMSAY RICHARDSON

Suggestions for the last of the seven ages of man

I HAVE recently had occasion to think on the pitiable plight of old men. For a great many reasons it is far more serious than that of old women. My mother and father, who have reached the age of retirement without physical handicaps of any kind, have been visiting me. My mother is able to adjust herself to her changed status; my father fills with difficulty the endless vacuity of his days. Though there may be certain minor deviations from the masculine pattern, I believe that his case is typical of old men the world over.

Women, because of the relative nature of their lives, have cultivated adaptability to people and to circumstances. First they have been daughters, conforming to the parental code, then young ladies, trying to please the men who have been graciously bestowing attentions, then wives adapting themselves to the exigencies of husbands' careers and finally mothers, decreasing that their children may increase. Just as on the ball-room floor men dance after their own peculiar fashion and girls must catch the step, however remote it may be from the measure of the music, so throughout life women, as the clever followers, have learned a lesson that serves them well during the

last of the seven ages of man. Therefore they are prepared to make the final and most difficult of all adjustments and to settle themselves comfortably in the back seat of life.

Then, too, specialization has not cursed women—even those who have followed careers. Through diversified tasks they not only have kept their minds flexible but also have acquired many minor skills that can not be taken from them as long as fingers and eyes remain usable. The mental flexibility acts as a shock absorber when they are struck by the new and different customs of the younger generation; and the skills prevent them from experiencing the sense of futility that comes to old men. My father, now that routine no longer serves as a narcotic, broods in comparative idleness upon the seeming ineffectualness of his life; while my mother busies herself in a thousand ways and meets the new conditions as from time to time she has adjusted herself to other changes. The restlessness of old men who have retired from the absorbing tasks of the provider seems to be due largely to such concentration upon business as has precluded avocational pursuits.

Certainly in the school of life my father has had no preparation for old