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A HUNDRED YEARS AGO

Suicide in England

Whether it be that man is more impatient than woman, that his troubles are greater, or that he shrinks less than she does from the unknown, at any rate suicide is far more frequent among males than females.

In Dr Westcott's book on suicides he states that from early times down to the present the proportion between male and female suicides has been remarkably constant, both in our own country and throughout Europe, three males to one female being the prevailing rate in the majority of States reckoned in their entirety.

From the last report of the Registrar-General just issued it appears that in 1893 the same proportion held good in England, the number of suicides among males being nearly three times as great as among females.

We are accustomed to look on women as the great sufferers at the period of the grand climacteric, and to allow much for their condition at that time; but in both men and women alike the period intervening between 45 and 55 years of age is that in which the largest number of suicides takes place, and as at other ages in men, far more frequently than in women. Early suicides are, in proportion to the total numbers, in each sex much more common in females than in males, those in girls below 15 years of age actually exceeding in number those in boys of that age, and those between 15 and 20, although slightly more numerous among males than females, being, in proportion to the total suicides of each sex, far more common among females than males. As to the modes adopted for putting an end to their existence, there are some which seem not to be at all in favour among women. Only 3 women, for example, committed suicide by gunshot wound as against 248 men; only 78 by knife as against 373 men. Hanging also only destroyed 134 women, whereas 572 men hanged themselves, which is much more than their proportion taking male suicides as three times as common as those among females. In drowning, however, and in poisoning, the women have more than their proportion, and in suicide by jumping from a height far more still.

Westcott says that the female sex is the especial patroness of death by drowning in every country, twice as many women as men drowning themselves in Europe every year. This proportion, however, does not seem to hold good in England, according to the Registrar-General, for his Report for 1893 gives 363 male suicides by drowning to 218 female.

As to the poisons taken, probably much depends on what is most readily obtained, but when we find that 117 people faced the horrors of death from poisoning by carbolic acid, 40 from oxalic acid, and 19 from strychnine we must believe that the commonly given verdict of insanity must have been often well deserved. Only 63 persons appear to have chosen the more gentle death by opium, and only 1 by chloral.

It is a sad inventory. The world must seem hard and hopeless indeed to tempt 112 people under 20 years of age to throw up the fight and seek oblivion. That it is hard, however, and life a thing not to be desired, appears also to be the teaching of experience to many, for we find that 342 people after struggling on for 65 years and upwards, ended their days by suicide, and that 6 old people of over 85 had no longer patience to wait for an end so long delayed.

Reference

British Medical Journal, February 1895, 378.

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