

Literature, &c.

British Magazines for July.

The Illuminated Magazine.

THE LAST HOUR OF A SUICIDE.

BY ANGUS B. REACH.

MIDNIGHT! The brazen clang of the great bell of St. Paul's tolled heavily out, and the chimes from a hundred steeples repeated—Midnight! The solemn, yet not unbroken, silence which for a brief period in the twenty-four hours reigns over London, was spreading abroad. The noise and confusion of the early night was dying away, and the rattle of vehicles through empty streets came upon the ear not as forming drops of the great tide of sound, but each distinct in its isolation. The day population of London had well nigh disappeared. Here and there hurried homeward groups of belated stragglers, converging joyously to the theatre or the brilliant party they had just left. But, with such exceptions, these aloof and astray in the great thoroughfares, were men and women, seldom seen but at night—creatures to whom the face of sunshine seems unnatural—who flit by, sometimes muffled up and silently or clothed in glaring gauds of silk and satin and gaudy ornaments, screaming gay songs with a miserable affectation of gaiety, and reeking from the loud, ribald orgies of a night tavern!

It was a cold, damp, clammy, cheerless night—the pavements were dark and sloppy. Men hurried by, thinking of the warm blaze which awaited them on their own hearths; and beings who had no homes or hearths to go to, shrunk up in sheltered corners, huddling the limbs close for warmth, and praying, praying for the end of the long, shivering night. A moaning easterly wind swept through the streets, damp and deadening to feel, and bringing with it a heavy, greyish fog from the Essex Marshes, the lamps shone dimly, encircled each one with a misty halo; and the above was of black, hopeless darkness. Now and then a soaking drizzle fell—not downright honest rain, but something more penetrating and melting still, and then a fierce, howling gust would catch it up in misty wreaths, driving it against the crouching, shivering forms who stooped down to avoid its violence, and wished to God that they were snug and warm at home.

On the every high was tenfold more dismal still. The fog careered in long heavy wreaths dark troubled along the stream—the wind howled most drearily among masts and rigging, and dashed the black muddy water against the piers of bridges and slimy landing places with a chill monotonous splash. No traffic was stirring on the river. It flowed blackly and sullenly, roaring under anchored barges, and hushing the reek grass upon the fat mud banks. It was a dreary sight to look upon—calling up indistinct visions of blue swollen corpses and men bathing madly for life in the cold inky fluid.

There is a bridge in Venice, called the "Bridge of Sighs." Painters have depicted it—poets have sung of it. Romance writers have woven fearful narratives of the hopelessness of those who crossed it; and there is hardly a young heart in England—a dreaming, enthusiastic, tender heart—which has not brooded over that "Bridge of Sighs"—imagined tales of heroic determination and gentle broken-heartedness—all woful, tearful, clinging round its antique structure, and giving deep claim to human sympathy to the carved stones which compose it. And in doing so—in roaming abroad for matter for our sympathies and affection—we do but follow our foolish national predilection. Why cannot there be poetry, romance, at home—on the Thames as well as the Rialto—on Waterloo Bridge as well as that of Sighs? Certain we are that if associations of human suffering—tales of broken hearts and blighted hopes—of long enduring, pining misery—there rescuing itself at once from earthly thrall, and rushing madly before its God—can give a fabric of senseless stone and lime power of stirring up emotion, terror, sorrow—Waterloo Bridge is entwined with these associations, as pleasantly as the Bridge of Sighs, and the noble river of England as really a romantic object as any muddy canal of Venice!

Midnight! A woman is pacing the pavement of Waterloo Bridge. She is young—she was once fair and gentle. And fair she is still. No sorrow, no burst of furious passion, can destroy the chiselling of those features—the noble height of brow and the moulded oval of the cheeks. But passion—the passion of madness and despair—is running riot in that face. The eye is wildly bloodshot and swollen—the teeth are clenched and ground together—the hand twisted with a convulsive grasp in the long dishevelled locks falling down on either cheek. She staggers forward mechanically. And now this paroxysm seems for the moment past; a heart sickness comes on her; she leans upon a balustrade, presses her forehead upon the damp, cold granite, and seems to woo the embrace of the chill night wind. She is dressed in gaudy finery, without warmth or comfort. A wreath of flowers encircles her head—a ghastly mockery of the wan, distorted features which they frame. The handkerchief carelessly placed over her shoulders has been all but blown away, but she makes no effort to replace it.

Midnight! The clang of the bell was loud upon that gust of wind. She starts up—leaps upon the seat of one of the recesses of the bridge—wipes hurriedly away the clammy sweat standing on her forehead, she gazes calmly and long upon the river below. How black—how pitchy black! A gurgling, eddying sound moans upwards from the gulf. The thought, until half formed, rises in her breast

She squeezes her brow in her hands, and then thinks again, and calmly—quite calmly.

"I remember that once I thought suicide a thing almost impossible; I could not realize it how people would willingly quit a snug, happy world, and go into darkness, rottenness! Oh, I said to myself, they are mad poor creatures, quite mad; none but a madman would do so; and as I looked upon black pools, and heard how people had plunged in, I turned away shivering, blessing God that I had my reason now, but I do not think as I once did; many have died by their own hands—oh, I remember hundreds. In a moment it will be over—what matters it if one be added to the list? What should I live for? I have no hope no friend, nobody will mourn me, or care whether to-morrow I be walking the cold wretched streets or floating in the river. No; I will do it—my mind is made up—God forgive—mother, I come to you!"

She nerved herself for the spring, when the noise of voices and footsteps interrupted her. "Let them pass, let them pass," she murmured; and, slipping down from the balustrade, she crouched in a corner of the recess.

A man and a woman passed. They were both young and happy. She was muffled up in a dark, warm dress, and clung closely to the arm of her companion. He beat down in speaking to her, and her face was turned up—oh, so hopefully, so lovingly to his. The light of the lamp made all this for a moment visible. Their words were not heard, but she saw them go by, knew, felt, what they were. Had not that upturned, confiding look told all most eloquently? Yes; they thought of the bright future they saw before them—of holy domestic love—of hearts mutually trusting and trusted—of young and pure, and teeming with unutterable love! It was but the vision of a moment; it came and was gone; but she who witnessed it writhed in anguish at the sight—a thrilling chord was touched—she bent down in her sore affliction, and sorely rocked her body to and fro; "Oh, God! oh, God! so it was—once with us—so I once spoke to him—so he once listened to me—and now—" Her hands, which had been clasped, so that the nails almost entered the flesh, relaxed, and she fell insensible upon the stone bench.

The body neither felt nor knew aught, but the subtle mind was active; it soared away, away from the dismal river, out of the dismal night; as the entranced girl saw a vision; it was of a country cottage embosomed in trees—a smiling, happy place, far from dirty bustling towns and cities, delicious in its rural freshness. Lofty trees grew around it and trailing shrubs clasped the walls with their fond tendrils, and their blossoms peeped slyly into the open casement. She knew the place—it was Home. She was there once again; a heavy weight, a dimly remembered sorrow had been lifted from her heart; she was happy, and the sensation was strange. From everything around her her soul drank in peace, but from one source it quaffed exceeding joy. Who walked at her side—who spoke so softly into her ear—whose hand clasped hers, so lovingly yielded to it? There were long pauses in the whispered dialogue, but something more sweet than honeyed words filled up the gap; and this lasted, as it were, for hours—she knew that hours had passed, although they seemed but minutes. Why, evening began to fall; a dim greyness spread all around. The silence became more intense. Birds ceased to sing and twitter—amongst the ivy. The peace of the summer evening was a holy thing, and the voice of the lovers did not break harshly upon its stillness.

"Say again you love me." It was he who spoke.

"You know it, do you not?"

"But it is so sweet to hear the words."

"Love you?"

There was a long sweet silence; then the whispering tones were renewed.

"I cannot bear to leave you—to part with you, even for a day, dearest; but my family—my father in particular—would not hear at this moment of my marriage."

"Your family—your father!" was the frightened reply, "Do they not know all!—how we met—how we loved?"

"It would have been madness, dearest, to have breathed the secret. In an instant I should have been torn from you. Oh, you do know my father!"

"Then what is to be done, what? Oh, I never thought of this; my foolish heart never suggested a doubt. Oh, I know not what to think—to say. My mother!"

"Does she know our secret?" was the quick interruption.

"I have no secrets from my mother. But what—what makes you look so? You would not have me tell my mother that I cared not—thought not of you—now, would you?"

"No, no dearest; surely not; but—"

"You are confused; oh, tell me all!—what is wrong? Have I not a right to know?"

"Dearest, you have. I will tell you the truth. I love you—love you as passionately as man ever loved woman. But, situated as I am, I dare not breathe a word of this to you; but you; but for you I will risk all—every prospect—every hope. Come, dearest; all is prepared; fly with me. Once in London, we can defy pursuit; and the instant that we arrive home the ceremony shall take place which makes you mine for ever."

She listened, stunned—stupidified.

He continued—"You give me no answer—no sign of hope. Oh, dearest, is it possible you distrust me?"

"No, no—not distrust—not distrust!"

"Then why not fly at once? You have said, you have sworn, that you loved—adored me; prove it now. Show me what you will do for him who has won your heart."

"But, oh! to leave my poor old mother,

who lives but in me—but for me! I cannot, indeed—in deed I cannot!"

"Then I am to understand, love, that I am only second in your affections—that, in short, you spurn the heart and hand I lay at your feet?"

"Oh! for Heaven's sake do not speak such cruel words—oh, what shall I do?—what shall I say?"

"Choose between love and mis-called duty. I cannot share a heart; it must be mine—all mine."

"This is cruel—cruel!"

"It is a kind cruelty, dear one. When once we are married, your mother shall know all. It is but two days' trouble, to be repaid by a life of happiness. Come with me—come—I see, I feel you are yielding."

"Dearest, I may be doing wrong. My heart tells me I am, and may God forgive me—but you—you I cannot resist. No—I cannot struggle against it. I will go with you, dearest, to the very world's end."

There was a very long pause, and she wept upon her lover's breast.

He murmured—"My own brave girl!"

The whole scene became indistinct and confused. The mind conjured up a thousand wavering, fantastic, shapeless images—amid which it wandered, stumbling and bewildered. Gradually a dim light streamed in, and the still fainting girl beheld herself in a small and poor room with smoky, dusty walls, and breathing a hot, murky, steaming air.

It was a very different place from home. She sat at the window. Her eyes were red with crying, and swollen so that she could hardly see. She was very pale—she knew it; and her fingers played mechanically with the long, disarranged locks which fell over her shoulders. A heap of needlework lay unheeded on her lap, and she looked with a vacant, wandering eye through the dim cracked panes before her. It was a different view from that which she had so often gazed upon with a merry face and a tranquil heart at home. Her eye fell upon masses of dingy brick walls, crowned with labyrinthine of irregular roofs and chimney-stacks. There they stretched away in an endless confusion of outlines—some roofs broken by graveled garret windows, and others patched up and variegated by extempore erections of crazy boards. Lines, on which swung yellow, smoke-dried clothes, ran from house to house. Squallid, bare armed women, leaning idly out of windows, and screaming shrilly to children in the street below. The smoke poured continuously from the yellow cans, whirling in eddies amid the masses of brick and tile. Upon one little flat space, between two ascending planes of roof, sat a man in his shirt sleeves, with a long pipe in his mouth, a pot of porter before him, and a newspaper in his hand. A whirling iron can was pouring out volumes of smoke behind him—nevertheless, he called sitting there "enjoying the air." A char-looking sort of a woman was hanging dripping clothes upon a rotten railing beside him, and occasionally screaming out at the dull pitch of her voice to a neighbor, occupied in a court below in filling a tea-kettle out of the water-butt. It was a true London roof scene, in a low neighborhood.

The girl looked long at it, as though she saw it not. A step sounded upon the stair—she clasped her hands and started to her feet. The door opened. He entered, and threw himself sullenly upon a chair, with his back towards her. She approached him timidly.

"Dear!"

"Well, what do you want now? You always want something."

She wrung her hands, and then covered her face with the little apron she wore.

There was a long silence—oh how different from that in the cottage garden!

"I want to make some arrangement," he said abruptly. She looked eagerly up.

"Oh do, do, dearest—be yourself again—speak to me—look on me as you used to do—I will not think of what has passed, never, never, no dearest—but oh, do, do, marry me!"

"Marry you," he repeated mechanically.

"You know, love," she continued, "trying to smile through her tears, "you know you said that whenever we came to London, we should be married, then you put it off—I was very unhappy, but did not say so—I trusted in you yet!"

And she laid her hand timidly on his shoulder. He turned round abruptly, and shook it off.

There was another silence.

"I left my home, my mother," her voice faltered, my friends, all, all for you. God knows how I loved you, how I trusted in you. I live in your voice, in your look; I would give up the world for you. Oh! you have deceived me! Speak, speak, or I shall go mad!"

She clasped his hand in hers and sunk on her knees before him.

"For the love of God fulfil your promise, your oath and marry me!"

"And be transported for bigamy!"

She fell upon the floor like a dead thing—as insensible as at that moment when her cold cheek was lying against the colder granite. All was blank, darkness, the wanderings of the mind were for the moment over. A dull sense of re-awakening pain came into her limbs, and she half felt something laid upon her shoulder.

"What's the matter? come, speak."

"Marry—bigamy—bigamy," she filtered forth.

"Oh, bah, let that drunken woman alone, she'll sleep herself sober where she is—there's no fear of her."

"Yes I think she is drunk," said the first voice.

"As gin can make her," rejoined the second. "Come, we're late."

And she was left alone.

"A drunken woman," she murmured; "better be drunken now than sober."

She sat partially erect on a stone seat, and flung her arms about wildly. Her eye sparkled with a mad glare, and she laughed hysterically.

"Drunk," she muttered, half unconsciously, "drunken, and who made me drunken, who drove me to it? Yes, I am a drunken woman, I know it. Drink is my best friend, now—it warms me and makes me forget. Yes give me that and I can shout and laugh—but such a laughter—never mind—gin is a good friend; it always does its work, it never leaves us sober."

She gave a long, loud, vacant laugh, and relaxed into insensibility. Presently she revived; and quite calm, and with all her senses about her, she pressed her hands against her forehead, and looked wildly about.

The soaking rain was still driven by the wind. The river still roared, and gushed, and gurgled beneath. It was more pitchy dark than ever.

She rose, and stood upon the stone seat; the fixed despair of her countenance was awful to see. "I have had a horrid dream," she murmured; "but I am going where there are no dreams."

She looked long and intently down the abyss. "Hopeless, defied, and an outcast I go!"

Suddenly she tossed her arms over her head. A change came over her face; her eye glowed, and she gazed upon the black vacancy.

"Mother! mother! I see you—I see you. Hush! wait for a moment, and I will be with you—a spirit like yourself."

There was a bound—a rush through the air—a flutter of silk and a heavy splash. It was all over!

A cry was raised, "a woman has thrown herself into the water." A solitary passenger and just approached her near enough to catch a glimpse of the disappearing form. Hoarse voices echoed the exclamation, and presently boats were put off, drags thrown, and lights gleamed on the dark rushing river.

"It's of no use," said a waterman; "the tides running like a mill-stream; she may be at London bridge by this time." And he returned to the public house from whence he had been summoned.

In a day or two a paragraph appeared in the daily papers, stating that the body of a woman, fashionably but thinly dressed, had been found in the pool. It lay in the dead house of a water side church for some days, but no one came to claim it. A coroner's inquest was then held. No evidence was produced as to the identity of the deceased. There was a verdict of "Found Drowned," and the next day a parish funeral.

[From an article in the same periodical by Mrs Poston, entitled "Zoological Gardens, or a home and abroad," we make the following selections.]

THOUGHTS IN A ZOOLOGICAL GARDEN.

THE first friends I met with were the ostriches, whom I last seemed to have left at Cairo, but a short time since, whether they had been brought from Arabia, at the bidding of Clot Bey, the physician of the Pacha. Here they had a bright green sward beneath their feet—there, a hard sandy court yard; but they seem happy enough as they are and to like the Swiss cottages nearly as well as the tombs of the Sultans. They have lost the wide desert, with its wondrous canopy of brilliant light and exchanged the picturesque crowds of the Eastern city, with its domes, minarets, tombs, dancing girls, and priests, its fountains and history tellers, its acrobancers, and its Pashas for the fair open scenes in England, the curiosity of her smiling, the bright-eyed children, and the interest of those to whom the East is still as a land of promise; but the creature yet put forth its long neck, and greeted one with a boldness which showed that in a land of mercy the ostrich even did not seek to hide his head, lest the strongest should be his oppressor; and yet was he wrong, that sly bird, for as in the East, so with us, they who are solitary and weak in friends, interest, and purse, are liable to be haunted down, by the strong in all, even as the poor ostrich on the desert plains of far Arabia.

The next odd bird that caught my view was a particularly old friend, and favourite companion of mine, the spoonbill, as he is called, of Cutch; and I felt a warm interest for the welfare of the creature, notwithstanding his long legs, unity of colour, and aspathetic countenance, when I remembered how often I had sat at my tent door, when heat prevented any occupation of my time, and watched the spoonbill paddling on the pool, shaded by a thick Banian tree, in search of food, and how I have heard of his making a rare and excellent curry, but never allowing him to be destroyed, because he seemed so calm and placid, and life so pleasant to him, passing it, however, in solitude, but for the Brahmin, who came down to bathe and pray, by the edge of the pool under his sacred tree, yet disturbed about it that had life, and but for the traveller, who filled his gourd, bathed his awelled feet, and calmly went on his way. The spoonbill makes a good item in the Indian landscape, too, and should, for this reason, if for none other, be spared by the sportsman; for in the noontide heat, when the buffaloes are plunged into the rivers, the camels resting from their toil at the oil mills, the villagers sleeping on their coils, and the birds silent in the trees, the spoonbill paddle about the pools, and give an agreeable idea of life to the landscape, their white figures throwing a bright reflection on