

A Novel Suicide Club.

BY WALTER BROWNE.



THE following extraordinary advertisement appeared in a London paper one day last summer. It was in an obscure corner and hardly likely to attract wide-spread notice, yet its weird invitation to suicide did not escape the eagle eye of my chief at Scotland Yard, at which famous establishment I was then employed:—

WHO WILL DIE WITH ME TO-NIGHT ?

I am tired of a solitary life and can bear it no longer. I have neither family nor friends, and I seek others similarly situated who will join me in a plan to end our lives together in comfort. Meet me in the South Kensington Museum at six o'clock, and wear a badge of erape upon your arms. I will wear a similar badge.

X. Y. Z.

I was ordered to investigate and, if possible, to prevent the formation of such a Suicide Club as seemed to be projected, the methods of which were to be so sweeping and so sudden.

Although armed with a warrant for the arrest of "John Doe, others implicated, etc.," I was especially warned not to make any arrests until I was fully satisfied as to which of those who wore the badge of death, if more than one should appear, was the author of the advertisement and the founder of the new Suicide Club. I was further instructed not to act until I was sure that the crucial time had arrived and that the strange body of cranks were about to execute their compact to die together.

It was with mingled feelings of amusement and awe that I examined my revolver before starting out on my strange adventure. I was totally unaware of the number of desperate mortals I might be called upon to encounter, but when I reflected upon the folly of attempting to make them desist from their deadly purpose at the point of my pistol, the absurdity of the situation made me smile. There was a suggestion of ghastly humor in the idea of

covering a man with a revolver and bidding him, in the name of the law, desist from committing the crime of self-slaughter.

South Kensington Museum is by no means a well-defined trysting place, and as I wandered through its many spacious galleries I feared lest I should fail altogether to encounter the blood-thirsty X. Y. Z., who had not only determined that he himself would die that night, but who sought to obtain traveling companions to that bourne whence no traveler returns.

I felt much oppressed with the weight of responsibility placed upon me. I was to save the life of one, perhaps of more than one fellow-creature; to rescue more than one soul from eternal damnation; and incidentally to arrest possibly a crowd of cranks who cared so little for human life that they were prepared to take even their own at practically a moment's notice. I endured an almost unbearable tension of fear and apprehension lest by some sudden impulse or at some prearranged signal one or more of my fellow-creatures should hurl themselves into eternity before my eyes, through my delaying action the fraction of a moment too long.

I had strolled into the Mummy Room, fancifully imagining that it might be an appropriate place for such a meeting as I had come to witness, and was leaning against a case containing the shriveled remains of what was once an Egyptian king, with all the hopes, passions, and ambitions of a powerful and lusty ruler, when a bright-eyed, handsome athletic young fellow sauntered past. I scarcely heeded the eager glance with which he scanned me, for at the moment I did not in the least associate that muscular and healthy specimen of humanity with the presumed morbid creature who had signed himself "X. Y. Z."

My attention, indeed, was wholly absorbed by a young and extremely pretty girl, who at the same moment was approaching from the other end of the gallery. She bore an unmistakable business air, which, however, did not conceal certain restless symptoms of timidity.

As the handsome young couple passed each other, they started violently, and exchanged a glance of obvious recognition, though they neither spoke nor stopped. It was that which caused me to watch them more closely. The man wore a somewhat threadbare,

though well-fitting suit of clothes, and a feeling of horror mingled with my sense of professional satisfaction as I saw upon his left sleeve a broad band of black crape. The girl was quietly and tastefully clad in a gown of some dark material, and as she passed me I saw upon the right sleeve of that fair bud of womanhood a similar band of black.

The young girl had evidently noticed the badge of death upon the man's arm, for after walking a few steps beyond me in a hesitating manner, she stopped and, with her pretty face crimson with blushes, she turned and looked back at him. He also had turned and stood with his hand at his chin in an attitude of indecision. In this position each looked long and curiously at the other, whom they reciprocally supposed had given the invitation to join in a double suicide.

Pity mingled with admiration seemed to beam from the eyes of the man as he looked at the splendid young creature to whom life, apparently, had so soon become unbearable. Presently, raising his hat with great courtesy, he approached the damsel, who stood expectantly with downcast eyes in evident embarrassment within a few yards of me.

"I am surprised to see you here, Miss F'ligh," he began, with some embarrassment.

"I don't see why, Jack," she replied, with a little lingering emphasis on the name.

He flushed with pleasure and said eagerly, taking her hand, "Then it's all forgiven, Nelly?"

"Of course, you foolish boy," she answered. "Why were you so stupid?"

He was about to clear up this point, doubtless, when suddenly his face fell and he said gloomily, touching the band of crape on her arm, "This means business, I suppose."

Her expression instantly reflected his, and she said sadly, "You, too — I had hoped to be alone in this."

He laughed bitterly, and turning with one accord, this sane and healthy pair, who, according to the terms of the advertisement, were soon to die together, walked slowly down the gallery side by side.

It was clear that neither of them was X. Y. Z. That they

were previously acquainted was equally clear. The unmistakable glance of recognition which they had exchanged when they first met had prepared me for the intimate character of the conversation which I had overheard, and which gave an ample clue to the situation. It was evident enough to me. Two lovers, separated by some inexorable reason, probably money or the lack of it, had independently resolved upon making a life which could not be happy as brief as possible. All this I thought out as I strolled along the gallery after them.

As I came nearer to them their talk was again audible to me. Not another word of the unpleasant object of their meeting was spoken by either, however. By a sort of tacit understanding each appeared to avoid the subject of the advertisement, and their conversation consisted exclusively of the usual allusions to the weather. Once when the man thoughtlessly remarked that it would probably be warmer on the morrow, the girl seemed to shrink from him and shiver slightly. And then the pair who had been brought together under such extraordinary circumstances uttered a laugh which had more of pain than pleasure in it, and lapsing into silence, strolled out of the gallery.

As they approached the restaurant at the entrance of the Museum, the young man said to his beautiful companion, who was soon to be his partner in death: —

“Shall we not take a little refreshment, — first?”

The word “first” seemed to stick in his throat.

With a smile of reviving happiness the little maid cried, as it seemed to me, almost joyfully: —

“Oh, yes! I would much rather take a little refreshment,” and she, too, had to gulp something down as she added the word “first.”

They took a table just inside the entrance, and I secured a seat sufficiently near to overhear some of their conversation. They ordered brandy and sodas. So did I. They evidently felt that they needed bracing for the work before them. So did I. Presently they ordered more stimulants, and I began to wonder if the curse of drink was the cause of their being tired of life.

It would have been a merry feast if the skeleton of that horrible advertisement had not sat in the vacant chair and chilled

that bright young couple to their very marrow. I flattered myself that I was a close student of character, and though I caught but few of their whispered words, I did not fail to read the feelings of that pair rightly.

In spite of the skeleton it was quite clear that the young man was very much in love with the strangely pretty creature who was to woo death with him, while the dainty little damsel was entirely unable to disguise the fact that this man who was seeking to die in her company was dearer to her than life. As I watched their ardent glances and noted their complete absorption in one another, a hope sprang up in me. They had had a little quarrel, I remembered, since there had been a talk of forgiveness. Might not their present ghastly purpose have been the result of this misunderstanding, and might not this misunderstanding be removed in time — before the arrival of the fateful X. Y. Z.?

Inwardly I rejoiced that my mission promised to have such a pleasant termination, but my satisfaction and self-congratulation were premature and misplaced.

At the moment when I felt that their eyes were speaking the preliminaries to an appeal to live and love, as their lips were tremulously framing the words "live for me, and I will live for you," a tall, gaunt stranger stopped suddenly just outside the restaurant and gazed long and earnestly at the badges of crape upon the arms of each of the young people. I immediately noticed that he, too, wore the fatal badge of the new Suicide Club, and recognized him at once as the arch conspirator, X. Y. Z.

If any doubt had existed it would have been at once dispelled by the man crying out in a loud voice: —

"Are you the young folks who answered my advertisement? I'm X. Y. Z. Glad to meet you. I've been looking all over the place, but little expected to find my friends of the black band in the restaurant. Never mind. A nip of brandy will put you in good shape for what is to come. Everything is ready and waiting. My carriage is outside. Let's jump in and get along."

All this before the startled pair could speak a word.

This was surely the recklessness of insanity. No one but a madman would have spoken of such a hideous project as he had in hand in the hearing of a crowd of people so loudly and so

freely. I realized that I had yet a difficult and possibly a dangerous task on hand.

Still, I was almost sure that I could count upon the coöperation of the young man, who had found a new motive for life in his love for the romantic girl, the current of whose morbid folly he had stemmed.

What was my dismay, then, to see the young people instantly change and show the greatest eagerness to fulfil to the limit their appointment with X. Y. Z. ! It seemed as if the stern old man had suddenly obtained hypnotic influence over that athletic young fellow and that fair, frail girl. Before his arrival they had seemed all gentleness and tenderness. Now each seemed as if on stern business bent. They announced their readiness to accompany X. Y. Z. to his home and at least listen to the details of his scheme.

I knew that the proper moment to make my arrests had not yet arrived; and above all, I wanted to see the home of the founder of the Suicide Club, and to learn the means by which he proposed that these two young people should die with him. It was therefore necessary for me to accompany them in the carriage. I had provided for such an emergency as this, and unobserved I slipped a band of crape around my arm. Then I announced myself as anxious to be of the party.

The young people started suspiciously, but X. Y. Z. greeted me cordially. He laughed loud and boisterously, shouting:—

“Bravo! The more, the merrier!”

At this the young girl shuddered slightly, and seemed about to falter. For a moment her courage appeared about to leave her, and she clung to the arm of the younger man for support. Her pretty cheeks flushed, then became very pale, but she bit her lips and rallied with a determined effort. We passed out of the Museum.

That the founder of the new Suicide Club was no mean personage was proved by the splendor of the brougham and liveried coachman which awaited us outside. We were driven rapidly to a pretentious house in one of the best streets in South Kensington. On that strange journey not one word was spoken except by the voluble old man, who laughed and chuckled fiendishly,

and time after time congratulated himself upon having gathered together, as he expressed it, "such a nice little family party."

Arrived within the luxuriously furnished room on the ground floor of X. Y. Z.'s house, I was astonished to see that a banquet had been prepared, and we were cordially invited to sit down and partake.

Not one word of our supposed approaching death was spoken by our host, who seemed to be in the best of spirits; but the three of us naturally thought of nothing else, and the dinner was hideously dull. For my own part, I sent every dish away from me untasted, partly from fear that the old fiend's scheme might be to poison us unawares, and partly because I had no inclination to eat with such a distasteful and probably so dangerous a task before me.

It was a relief when the table was cleared and I still saw no symptoms of convulsions or collapse in my companions. Then it was that the old man arose and deliberately said:—

"Now I will make my proposition by which I and my friends may mutually end our lives together in comfort, according to the promise contained in my advertisement."

I fumbled in my pockets and held a pair of handcuffs ready to snap them upon the wrists of the maniac.

"I regret that I am only able to extend this offer to two of you," continued X. Y. Z., "for you, sir,"—he was addressing me,— "have not fully complied with the terms. You have sat at my table, but you have not eaten with me."

A wave of happiness and thankfulness surged through me at that moment. I felt sure that my caution had saved my life. But the others! They had eaten, and I felt that there was no time to be lost. Arrests must be made, and physicians must be summoned. Stomach pumps might yet save the lives of those two sturdy young people.

"My scheme is simply this," began the old man, and I decided to wait at least long enough to hear the vile story from the madman's own lips.

"You will make as pretty a pair as ever were wed," continued the old fellow, "and I want you to keep house for me. You shall have the deeds, and my fortune when I die."

I was mystified. I gasped for breath.

"All I ask," said X. Y. Z., taking the young people kindly by the hand, "is that you let a lonely old fellow without a friend in the world, since he put the badge of a widower on his sleeve, have a lodging in the house. Above all, never let him dine alone again as long as he lives."

There was a moment's silence. Then simultaneously three newspaper clippings were produced and three voices asked in consternation:—

"Are you not the man who advertised for some one to die with him?"

"To DIE with me!" shouted X. Y. Z., in accents of horror, at the same time snatching the advertisement from my hand.

"Damn it!" he ejaculated. "The confounded printers have dropped the letter 'N' from its place. I wrote: 'WHO WILL DINE WITH ME?'"

Two smart city editors of up-to-date newspapers the next day failed to print the sensational story of a new Suicide Club which they had scheduled, for Jack Brevier and Miss Nelly Fligh, each star reporters, reported it to be "a fake." Shortly afterwards those enterprising reporters sent in their resignations, and X. Y. Z. welcomed into his household an adopted son and daughter.

As for me,—I left Scotland Yard, and took to—Well, that is immaterial, anyway.

