

"A CASE OF SUICIDE IN MY CHURCH"

The following is a report of a minister in a Middle Western State of a situation he faced in his church, including his comments on what he tried to do about it. He submitted the report because he wanted (1) help on how to think about the problem represented, (2) criticism of what he had done and (3) suggestions on what he could have done that he didn't do. The report is unedited.

Man, age, 42 years. He came of a family of twelve children, reared in the country under rather poor circumstances. He was a barber by trade, and had not been able to make a very good living, especially the last few years. He took great pride in his small home. Had two children, a girl, 16, a boy 18. He had one crippled foot and because of it, was spared the heavier work on the farm as a boy. Until six months before his death he was a faithful attendant and member of my church, a member of the church board. His parents had adhered to a very rigid code of conduct and were very strict. He was rather strict with his two children.

His wife called the pastor and with hard, determined face announced that she wanted him to conduct a funeral for her on the fourth of July (interviewed on the second of July.) He was astonished to learn that she intended to take poison. The daughter was in tears over the matter and had searched for the poison but could not find it. During the course of a three hour's conversation, the story of the strained relationships between husband and wife came out.

"I just don't know what has gotten into him, lately," were her words. "He is not at all like he used to be. He-- well, it's more than I can stand. He has said things to me, and accused me of things that I cannot forgive. He has talked all over town about me, and there is not a word of truth in any of it."

The stories circulated by the husband were to prove to any of his friends who would listen to him that his wife was not true to him. He was the type to feel that this was utterly unpardonable. He always paused before entering the house to listen, and upon one occasion heard one side of a conversation that indicated that all of his fears about her were established. They had quarreled about the children; he indicating that she had no regard for the immoral character of her daughter's associates, and she justifying their choice.

It developed that the husband had recently threatened her with a gun, which the son took from him and hid. Her life had become a nightmare of terror, yet she would not call outside help. "I told him to go ahead, but make a clean job of it." The woman was extremely courageous, and many times had called his bluff, both in reference to herself and the children; getting her way in spite of him. "I have decided to get out of it all, and that it will be best for me to go this way.-- I want you to ask the undertaker to let the hearse follow all of the cars instead of lead them."

The trouble had developed within the last year, and during that time she had built up a business of her own and was making more money than he. She had bought a machine for it and was making tufted garments, beach robes, and spreads, coats, etc.

"He used to try to fix my machine when it got out of order; but it takes an expert so I had to tell him to leave it alone." (He was an amateur mechanic, rather proud of a sharpening machine he had made)-- "He accuses me of having relations with the man I have to have in to fix the machine."-- "He wants to know how much money I make, and how I spend it! I buy clothes for the children. I asked him to buy our boy a suit for graduation, but he wouldn't do it, so I got it myself."-- "I buy all of the groceries."

The pastor extracted a promise from her not to use the poison until she had had another talk with him; and if nothing else could be done about it a divorce could be obtained. He advised her that:

1. It seemed to him that her husband was really jealous of her work and the larger amount of money she was able to make, but not willing to admit his failure as a good provider he had found escape for the jealousy along other lines.

"But we are so much better off than we have ever been," she objected.

"If he would apologize for what he has said, I would forgive him-- one word."

"Has he objected to your work?" (Pastor)

"No. It has saved our home for us. We would have lost it."

2. Try to interest him in your work. Tell him what you make, and how you spend it. By all means let him try to fix your machine the next time it gets out of order.

3. Be as good a wife to him as you have for the last twenty years, in spite of your working fourteen hours a day at your own business. If you understand what really ails him, you can help him get back on his feet.

"Not unless he'll take back what he said."

The pastor awaited an opportunity to see the man away from the house. A week later he had a three hour talk with him. Three members of the board had told the pastor what the man had told them-- a recital of the details of his suspicions-- thus he knew what to expect.

"I hate it more on account of the church than any other reason, preacher."

"You are certain that what you suspect is really true?"

He talked for at least two hours, giving every detail. He suspected his wife of having relations with at least four men. Her boss, who visited twice a year, the mechanic and two neighboring men-- life-long friends of the family. He related his fears concerning his children, and told of pursuing a taxi driver who persisted in blowing his horn to call his daughter. He indicated how he had forbidden the neighbors to come to his house-- that his wife had entered divorce proceedings, at which point he broke down and cried.

"Sometimes I think I'll end it all."

"Could you forgive your wife?"

"If she would change her ways, yes."

The pastor indicated that his suspicions might be too strong, as he could not prove definitely that she had done anything wrong.

"Preacher, I'm no fool! I can see....." and he went over every bit of evidence he had again, stressing for conviction.

"Perhaps, after all, the divorce will be the best solution."

He again broke down. "I don't want to see my home go to pieces, preacher, I can't stand it. If she would just say one word about being sorry I would forgive her."

The pastor tried to comfort him and indicate how much his children needed him. He asked for another chance to talk it over later after the man had acted upon the policy of suspending judgment for a while to see if his wife had not 'changed her ways.'

Three days later the man shot himself after threatening to kill his wife-- the daughter coming between him and saying: "If you shoot her, you'll have to do it through me!"

The wife said, as the man was dying, "One word would have prevented this. Do you think he was insane?"