

# A Psychiatric Puzzle

## I

It was about two o'clock in the morning and Mr Hurych was on his way home from a meeting of the Total Abstainers Society which had been held in a restaurant in the Malá Strana. The reason why that meeting had gone on so long was that it had been discussing the resignation of the society's president, who had become involved in an ugly affair. He stood convicted, in fact, of having drunk a glass of *pilsner* in a certain restaurant. As a man of honour, he had stepped down.

Mr Hurych, then, was going home across the Charles Bridge. He walked along full of the heart-warming assurance that he was working for the good of humanity. In his stomach, true, he still felt the coolness of soda-water, but a little higher, there beat a warm, an ardently philanthropic heart - a heart that would have been within an ace of succumbing to fatty degeneration if his doctor had not told him to cut out the beer. And now, he was an abstainer of some six months' standing; he had thrown himself wholeheartedly into the fight against alcohol, become an active member of an abstainers' association, a subscriber to Humanitarian Causes, a student of Esperanto and a vegetarian.

His musings were interrupted by a shout from the river. This was exactly the kind of nocturnal cry that young poets love and that brings them in sixteen hellers a time, for that is the going rate for a line of verse in which a cry comes floating up from the river in the stillness of the night, mysteriously, out of the unknown.

Mr Hurych leaned over the balustrade of the bridge and called down to the surface of the Vltava, full of a premonition of disaster: 'Was there something you wanted?'

At that moment, as he stood leaning his philanthropic heart over the side of the bridge, he could think of nothing cleverer to say.

And at just the time when Mr Hurych was peering keenly down into the water, a hairdresser called Bilek was proceeding across the bridge in the direction of the Malá Strana.

This gentleman, though he was no abstainer and certainly not on that particular day, still had a heart no less noble, no less imbued with love for his fellow-man than that of Mr Hurych. A heart of gold, a selfless heart.

One swift glance told him that Mr Hurych was leaning over the side of the bridge in a suspicious manner. Mr Bílek was a man of action. Softly as a cat, swiftly as a lynx, he approached Mr Hurych from behind, seized him by the arm and attempted to wrestle him to the ground. Mr Hurych, though, was not coming quietly: he grabbed the unknown man by the neck and to shouts of 'Police!' these two high-minded men grappled with each other, while the hairdresser cried out: 'Calm yourself! What was it that drove you to despair?'

The police-patrol came trotting up and Mr Bílek, clasping Mr Hurych in his arms with all his strength, panted out as they approached: 'Officers, this gentleman was about to jump into the river and I've saved him.'

Four highly experienced hands now took charge of Mr Hurych and grasped him under the armpits and in a fatherly voice, one policeman started to try to talk Mr Hurych out of his suicidal frame of mind.

Mr Hurych was taken aback by this state of affairs and shouted, like a man in a paroxysm of hysteria: 'It's all a mistake, gentlemen!'

Then he burst into a strained and unnatural laughter and repeated: 'You're mistaken, gentlemen; I really wasn't going to jump into the river.'

He was interrupted by the high-minded barber, who was walking behind them: 'This isn't the first time I've saved people when they were trying to jump into the river, but no-one so far has struggled as violently as you did. It's plain to see, you're terribly upset. Why, you've torn my waistcoat.'

Then the other policeman started droning into Mr Hurych's ear: 'Good Heavens! Where would we be if everybody had to take his own life as soon as some little thing went wrong? It'll all come right again. Whatever it was that made you so upset, it'll sort itself out. And in the morning, when you've cooled down, you'll see that it's a beautiful world in spite of everything.'

'It's a beautiful world,' said the policeman on Mr Hurych's right. 'If everyone were to want to jump into the water every time he got some bee in his bonnet, half the world would have to drown itself.'

Meanwhile, Mr Bílek was tugging at Mr Hurych's coat and adding, with much emphasis: 'Just so that you know who it was that saved your

life, remember, when you come to yourself, that the name is Bilek and that I'm a hairdresser in Smíchov.'

Once again Mr Hurych began to cry out hysterically: 'I beg you, gentlemen, let me go; really, I didn't have anything in mind: I was just leaning over the balustrade because it seemed to me that someone was calling out down on the river.'

'I beg your pardon!' retorted the barber. 'So you weren't going to jump, eh? I've had some experience of cases like this, my friend! I only have to look at someone and I know straight away whether he's going to jump or not. If you hadn't intended to jump, old son, you wouldn't have put up such a fierce struggle. When you remember all this in the morning, you'll thank God that your Guardian Angel sent me your way.'

Mr Hurych's patience finally gave way and he turned and hurled a number of coarse insults into the face of that noble and selfless man. More in sorrow than in anger, Mr Bilek addressed the policemen: 'That's the reward a man gets for doing a kindness! When this gentleman comes to himself in the morning he'll be ashamed of the way he repaid his rescuer.'

Mr Hurych made an attempt to throw himself at the hairdresser, but desisted when the policemen told him they would send for the drunk-cart.

As they neared the police-station, he made one last attempt to clear the whole thing up: 'Why won't you believe me? I swear to you that it's all an accident.'

'Now, now, calm down,' said the policemen soothingly, 'when you've had a good night's sleep and cleared all this out of your head, you'll see the world with completely different eyes.'

'Oh, my God!' wailed Mr Hurych.

## II

There is a whole clutch of mental illnesses which are accompanied by suicide-attempts, such as *paralysa progressiva*, paranoia, melancholia, various types of mania, hysteria and psychosis.

Police-doctors who are called to treat would-be suicides use, as the most reliable psychiatric aid, the question-and-answer system.

The answers that an attempted suicide gives serve as a guide to the doctor in diagnosing the specific type of mental illness, which will

always be accompanied by confusion of concepts and ideas.

In this case too a police-doctor was sent for to examine Mr Hurych's mental condition.

Before he arrived, the Station Officer interviewed the altruistic barber and wrote a report:

He too could not resist the temptation to lighten Mr Hurych's gloom by pointing to the delights that the world has to offer.

'It'll all come right again, Sir; everything will turn out all right, even if it's an unhappy love-affair. It'll pass. It's true what they say: "There's more than one fish in the sea." When you've cooled down, in the morning, you'll want to go and thank Mr Bilek most warmly for having saved your life. And if it's some kind of domestic upset, why not move out? Don't take it so much to heart. And if you're in financial difficulties of some kind (for I can't see into your circumstances), well, an honest man can get by. Work gives a man dignity!'

And what reply did Mr Hurych make to all this? He covered his face with his hands and cried out: 'For the sweet love of Christ, I tell you I wasn't going to do anything!'

And then Mr Bilek was on at him again: 'I am Bilek, the hairdresser from Smíchov. You can tell me what drove you to it.'

Mr Hurych began to cry.

### III

The police-doctor arrived and said: 'Bring in the examinee.'

Mr Hurych was brought in. His face was white with fear, his lips pale, his hair dishevelled.

'Why were you going to jump into the river?'

'I swear that I wasn't.'

'Don't deny it. We have Mr Bilek and the policemen as witnesses. When they saved your life, you struggled violently.'

'This is terrible,' lamented Mr Hurych.

'Tell me, why does the sun set?'

'Please, doctor, I beg you!'

'Can you tell me the names of some independent states in Asia?'

'Doctor, please!'

'What is six times twelve?'

But at that point, Mr Hurych's self-control deserted him and instead of saying 'seventy-two', he thumped the police-doctor round the ear as

hard as he could.

In the morning, they took him off to the lunatic asylum, where he has been detained for the last eighteen months, because the doctors have not yet been able to detect in him that awareness that he is mentally ill which, according to the psychiatric text-books, is the first sign of an improvement in a patient's mental condition.