

LOVE'S LAST DELAY.

BY CLARENCE M. BOUTWELL.

I.

What consternation there will be down here, dear friends, if ever the moon turns gossip. The dignified old satellite long ago acquired the watchful habit of keeping her face constantly turned towards us. Let us hope that so long as the sea finds her attractive, and stretches upward for the kisses of the moonbeams upon his wrinkled face, she will be discreetly silent regarding mere human loves and hates, mortal comedies and tragedies.

Her saucy face was just looking over the eastern horizon on the night when my story begins, and her smile was making the world bright and beautiful. I cannot tell how many lovers she shone on that night, for she is silent, and I don't know, but I think I may venture the opinion that none of them were happier or more worthy of happiness than the two whose lives we are to follow for a little time.

Sidney Cobleigh and Eleanor Preston were in that remarkable condition of happiness (quite beyond my art to depict, since it is incomprehensible to those who have not experienced it, and indescribable by those who have) which comes from a proper and pleasing combination of "Will you?" and "I will."

"Every cloud has a silver lining." This has been for ages the voice of cheer and sympathy in trouble and bereavement. Did you ever think to reverse it all? Has not every silver lining, which comes into our lives to give us pleasure and a chance to rise to our higher aspirations, a cloud side, too?

When a strong man, a good man, a handsome, intelligent, cultured man—a man like Sidney Cobleigh, in brief—lavishes the whole affection of his true life on a woman who is responsive, and a woman like Eleanor Preston, the silver side of life shines out under the light of love.

But behind it all there was a cloud—a cloud in which pride, prejudice, poverty, wealth, wickedness, want, helped make up the darker shades.

Eleanor Preston's father was rich; Sidney Cobleigh was poor; a condition of things which has formed the groundwork for more than one sad story; a condition of things common enough, but none the less tragic in the effects which may come as a natural sequel. Common as death, and as old, yet new every day.

"I shall go and seek my fortune."

"I shall have enough for both."

"I shall win your father's approval."

"We can live without it if we must."

"I shall always be true to you."

"And I to you, for ever."

So long as one great body of laws, God-given, govern the activities of the human mind, there will be little difference in what other lovers will say and do under the circumstances we have mentioned.

But so long as mankind is made of workers and waiters there will be at least two kinds of results. The way to achieve utter failure is to talk of what is to be done; "the way to do a thing, is to do it."

So say I.

So said Sidney Cobleigh.

He acted on it, too.

There are ways and ways to fortune; slow ways and swift; sure ways, and those in which a hundred fail for every one who succeeds. Sidney Cobleigh believed himself the one man in the hundred, and to him a belief was a spring to action. The day after the night when he kissed his promised wife for the first time, he was on his way to one of the richest mining regions of the West.

"Get gold," was what society would say to the man who aspired to the honor of wedding the daughter of Archibald Preston. "Get gold," was the echo he felt would find a place in the heart of Archibald Preston himself.

So be it; he would get gold.

Day is prosaic. Some, even lovers, have said that engagement is, too. When the lovers parted at noon, there was more of the matter-of-fact in their words and acts than either would have thought possible when the moonlight was around them the night before. There was the discussion of the route he was to take, and the connections he was to make in his journey. There were promises of frequent letters. Each pledged the other the privilege of an early knowledge of sickness or accident, should either come to one of them. This was the end. Her lover turned to go. The woman-nature broke down at last.

"Be very sure you send for me at once if you are sick or in trouble. I almost feel as though the very winds of heaven would aid us. Turn your face this way, wherever you may be, and call me in your heart. I will come," she said, through her tears.

"Good-by, and God bless and keep you," he answered. "I shall remember your quaint fancy, but I am sure that a letter or a telegraph would be better. Good-by." One long kiss and he was gone.

II.

If Sidney Cobleigh had waited a week he would never have gone to the mines, and this story would never have been written.

Archibald Preston kissed his daughter one

night coldly, for he was not a demonstrative man, but more kindly than usual.

"I am not well," he said; "I am an old man, What shall you do when your father is gone?" She told him honestly what her sometime future was to be.

"Promise me you will not marry for two years," he said. "I feel that your choice is a wise one in every respect but one. If he had money I would send for him to come home at once and marry you. As it is, promise me you will not marry for two years."

"He may return rich in less time than that."

"Promise me, please promise me."

"I promise. Unless you give me your permission before that time, I will not marry for two years."

Without his permission!

Archibald Preston took a journey that night from which he will never come back to say that this may be or that may not—a journey so far that he may never know whether earthly promises are kept or broken—a journey which is never commenced in all God's universe save by those who are mortals, and which has never ended save where none but immortals are. A journey of weakness. A journey of blindness. A journey of white lips and folded hands. To a loving God. May he rest in peace.

The oldest and best friend of the Prestons, Dr. and Mrs. Kelland, could not have been kinder to the desolate girl in her great sorrow than they were.

Eleanor had a man's strong arm on which to lean when there was work to be done; a woman's kind heart to comfort her when duty left only painful quiet possible.

Sidney Cobleigh was notified of the sad event, of course; but, at the advice of Dr. Kelland, he did not return for the funeral. Eleanor wrote the letter in which she advised him to remain away for a time. But she wrote sorely against her own desires, and she quoted Dr. Kelland:

"Your father would not have approved of the match. It would not have been made public, if he had lived, that you are engaged to a young man who has only himself to depend upon for his daily bread. I grant you that Sidney is worthy; I admit that I am myself one of his warmest friends; it is true that I believe in him fully and completely. But your father did not. For him to come now would be to advertise your engagement to all your relatives and friends. It is no time to do that. Your promise to your dead father stands in the way of it, if you desire to carry out that promise in spirit as well as in letter. You have friends who will do everything for you; you have fortune. You will have but two years to wait."

So it was settled.

Letters passed between the lovers regularly. Each knew all that the other did. Each knew the thoughts and feelings, the joys and cares, of the other. Sidney was working hard, and acquiring money rapidly. Eleanor was slowly wearing out the memory of her grief, and coming to appreciate her friends, the Kellands, and her distant lover more and more every day.

Sidney need not have continued his labor. He had possessed enough for his own moderate use during the two years he must wait. And the woman who had given him her promise was ready to say, "Mine is thine," when the two years was gone.

He was no fortune-hunter; and, being blameless on such a score, would doubtless have cared little for what the world would have said if he had gone home, waited his time, and married a rich woman while poor himself. To see her; to enjoy her companionship; to hear her voice; to touch her hand; these were temptations which came to him again and again; temptations to leave all and go to her.

But he loved the excitement of the life he was leading, and he was one of those men whose hardest task in life was to wait. He counted himself fortunate that he was so constituted that increased work made waiting easier.

So he remained in the mines.

This is not a story of mining-life, and I shall not try to picture for my readers the freshness and freedom of the existence which Sidney enjoyed. His cabin stood on a little hillside, facing the south, and affording a view of the mountains in the distance. At the foot of the hill ran a little stream of water. Near at hand were the rude habitations of the others of this little community of seekers for sudden wealth. The nearest cabin was perhaps, an eighth of an mile from his.

There were men there whose lives were romances. Perhaps we may look into the history of some of them at a future day. Picturesque as it all was, we must do little with it now.

Good men were there, fled from wrong at home; bad men, fugitives from law; old men, young men. No women. No physic, no religion. Happiness was the rule. Would it end?

It did end one day. In more than a year, less than two. A few days before there had been a party of prospectors with them for a day. They had gone away with the heartiest wishes of the miners. No one suspected any possibility of their having done any injury in the little settlement, even inadvertently.

But this day a half-dozen men complained of being tired and far from well. By afternoon they were worse. And a man who was called "the doctor," and who was believed to be in the mines rather than in the East, because of the unfortunate results attending the use of some drugs of which he knew less than he had pretended, pronounced the men sick with small-pox.

Some men in every community are cowards. It was so here. Some are cowards only under certain circumstances. That was so in this case also. Some men fled from the settlement who had needed only some emergency—an emergency of any kind whatever—to show them in their true light. Others, who would have fought savages or wild beasts in aid of their companions left the settlement or remained away from those who were ill.

Sidney Cobleigh, a man who never drank or gambled, was not as popular as he deserved to be. Those brave enough to care for the sick had friends or relatives to claim their attention.

Sidney, terribly sick, was utterly alone.

Day after day and night after night he tossed upon his bed of pain. By day the sunshine burned him, and the distant mountains looked like pillars of heat; at night the moon looked in upon him as he gathered up the scanty covering to shut out the cold. He was rational at times, and would lie weeping silently over his terrible condition; then he would be wild with delirium, and his fevered imagination would people his narrow room with demons. He watched the outer world through the narrow windows set high up in the wall, because of the possibility that "a man's house" might have to be "his castle" in a literal sense some day when it suited the wickel convenience of the cruel savage, and wondered listlessly whether he should ever stand under the free sky again. Then he would give way to the disease again, and the greatest boon he would have asked would have been to die.

So for days, until one evening he awoke from a long sleep, his brain clear, and the fever gone.

How weak he was—weak in body especially! His mind seemed strong again. The power to reason about his needs had returned to him, and with it the indomitable will which would not give up. Slowly, and with great effort, he left his bed. He could not stand. But he worked his way, little by little, across the room to the pail of water. It took him a half hour to do it. He drank deeply.

He found clean clothing. Finding it and changing what he had worn so long, took another hour. He had not stood on his feet at all.

He found food. There was not much in the house. He was wise enough to eat only a little. Every power of mind was being brought under a strict subordination to the will which had chosen life before anything else.

He crawled to the door. Some one who feared the sick man might die of exposure had been kind, or some one fearful of the consequences to those outside had been cruel. It matters not which. Enough that his door was fastened on the outside.

The cold tears crept slowly down over his wasted cheeks, and dropped silently through his white thin fingers. Unable to stand, unable to speak above a whisper, almost out of food and water, and a helpless prisoner in his own house.

Suddenly he thought of Eleanor; he had not thought of her before since he had recovered his senses. His memory went back to her parting words. Was what she said prophetic! He turned his face towards the east, and whispered, brokenly: "Eleanor, come to me, God knows I need you now, if I ever needed you. Come quickly!"

II.

The greatest ball which had ever been given in the city where Eleanor Preston lived was at its height. Bright faces smiled. Bright jewels flashed. Music crashed. It was an event to be long remembered.

Eleanor—her year of mourning for her father over—was present. Her friends, the Kellands, were with her. More beautiful than most of those present, and more tastefully dressed than any of the others, she was kept in the dance for hour after hour. She enjoyed it all; the exercise, the admiration, the compliments. But at last she felt she must rest. She said: Lieut. Clong, I will go and sit in the conservatory for a little time. Will you go and cheer my loneliness by something more concerning your life on the Plains?

Lieutenant Clong might have excused himself if he had known that all the interest she had—and any one could see that she was deeply interested—centred in "on the Plains." He only noticed how she said "your life," and he went with her.

I have nothing against Lieutenant Clong. He was a gentleman and a brave man. I shall not drag the details of the sorrow of so good a man as he into the light. Briefly as possible, during the next half-hour he asked Eleanor Preston to marry him and she refused him.

"At least, let me have one last waltz with you. I leave the city to-morrow. I shall never see you again."

"Yes, Lieutenant Clong; I will dance with you."

Like a breath came the words through the westward-looking window before which they stood.

"Eleanor—come—to—me. God—knows—I—need—you—now—if—I—ever—needed—you. Come—quickly!"

She glanced at her companion. He had heard nothing.

Suppose her face was white, and that she trembled. Was that reason for him to wonder? She pitied Clong; she had promised to dance with him; she did it.

It was not a long dance. Perhaps the sweetness of this woman's companionship was too much for the man who had for ever lost all hope of winning her. Perhaps her imagination was tormenting the woman who had fancied the tones of her loved one calling for her help. In a quarter of an hour she was standing before the same window, and listening to these words, as the wind from the west seemed to faintly breathe them in her ear:

"Eleanor—I—shall—die—unless—you—come!"

Men loved to serve Eleanor Preston. One went gladly to find Dr. Kelland, another to call her carriage.

"Dr. Kelland," she said, "you must gratify a woman's whim. Women are privileged to do, without giving reasons. I am going to Sidney Cobleigh. Nothing could hire me to delay for one moment. Will you go with me?"

"I will. I can notify my partner by letter. You will explain. I shall insist on that. But your condition at this moment is such that I wouldn't risk refusing you. I will go."

They drove at once to the station.

"Two first-class tickets to Chicago," said the doctor.

"You will have to wait twelve hours, sir; the train has been gone ten minutes."

They took the next train, and were delayed twenty-four hours by an accident before they were a hundred miles from home. After that, no greater delays than they would have found had they started before.

The history of a forced journey, in which every moment is a new fear, is not a pleasant one. The reader will pardon me if I do not write it.

They reached the post office, to which her letters for Sidney had been addressed, early in the morning. It was noon when they entered the little settlement which had been made strangely familiar to Eleanor by her lover's letters. There was no need to ask questions. She could select his cabin from the description he had written.

Dr. Kelland asked, however. He wanted to be sure, and he had no keen lover-eyes to see all that she could.

The man asked looked strangely at them as he answered the doctor's question. He added: "Cobleigh had the small-pox. Perhaps he's dead; I haven't heard."

They hurried up the hillside, the noonday sun beating down upon them unheeded. They stopped at the door with frightened hearts. Eleanor looked at the mountains and wondered how anything in nature could be so calm and still while her heart and brain were slowly breaking.

They knocked.

There was no answer.

At length, Dr. Kelland broke the door in. We will pass over without description some of the sights they saw. We will not tell how everything showed that every morsel of food had been found and used. Let us look at the worse; and look no further.

Sidney Cobleigh leaned against the wall, his face towards the East, his forehead against his open palms. His black hair rested against a whiter background than though it had lain on snow. There was no need of questions. But Eleanor asked them.

"Is he dead?"

"Dead," said Dr. Kelland.

"Since when?"

"Perhaps an hour ago; certainly not two."

"With small-pox?"

No. He hasn't that. Some mountain fever which the mountain air cured days ago. Looking as he does, there is only one conclusion to be stated. He has simply starved to death."

"Could we have saved him, then?"

"Yes, but—that is—"

"Tell me the truth." Her voice was raised a little. "Could we have saved him?"

"Yes."

"When?" Her soul was in her voice.

"I—I can't really tell."

"You can tell, Dr. Kelland, and I know it. Could we have saved him yesterday?"

"Yes."

"Without any doubt?"

"Without any doubt," he said, sadly and slowly.

IV.

There is a beautiful woman in one of the largest private insane asylums in the East. She has been there for years. She will only leave it when she dies. The best medical talent in the world has pronounced her incurable.

Usually she is calm. But when the moon is full she acts out a frightful scene which she has patched up from the fragments of her lost memory. It always ends in this way. She sweeps a long low courtesy to empty space, and says: "Yes, Lieutenant Clong, I will dance with you. I care nothing for you—less than nothing. My lover is dying, and calling for me in vain. My whole happiness for this world and the next is slipping through my heedless fingers. Every moment is priceless. Delay is murder. Procrastination is madness. To wait is suicide. But I will dance with me!"

M. GEORGES GRANDHOMME, the secretary of the Paris Jockey Club, has just died, to the great regret of his numerous circle of French friends; and doubtless many English have a pleasant recollection of a gentleman who was always most obliging and courteous. M. Grandhomme was the founder of the club.