

The Sibyl's Augury

From a Physician's Diary

by Sylvanus Cobb, Jr.

It was in 'forty-eight that, young in my profession, I settled in Greyburn. I had spent my full term at college, and had also given almost two years of my time to studying and practicing in the hospitals of Europe; and I am pleased to be able to state that very shortly after settling in the aforementioned place I had as much business as I could conveniently attend to. In two or three cases of fearful threatening aspect I had met with happy success; and a successful man people are willing to trust. And then, again, being fresh from the very best surgical school in the world—the Academy of Louis XV., in Paris—I very quickly and emphatically made my mark upon the public mind in the result of several capital operations which I had occasion to perform.

I had been almost a year in Greyburn, and had become so well satisfied with the people, and they, in turn, had given token of being so well satisfied with me, that I had fully concluded to regard it as my permanent abiding place. It was on a clear, pleasant evening in May that I was visited by a gentleman from the neighboring town of Foxborough. He had called during the day, in my absence, and had left his card, with word that he would remain in town until he could see me. The card bore the name of "ADAM GREGORY, D.D.," and I knew him at once for the Principal of the Theological Seminary in the town mentioned. He was a middle-aged, mild-faced gentleman, with one of those marked organizations in which no amount of intellectual or mental disturbance can overcome the innate disposition to kindness and frankness.

Mr. Gregory took a seat in my office, and regarded me attentively before he introduced his business. I knew very well that he was measuring the outward signs of my fitness for his purpose. Presently his hands were suffered to rest easily one within the other, and the haze of suspense passed from his face. And then he told me his errand.

His daughter Cordelia—his only daughter—he feared was dying. She had been failing for several weeks—he might say, for several months,—though only lately had he been really alarmed. He had called the best medical counsel of his town, but without avail. Physicians who had seen her were of the opinion that her disease was consumption, and incurable; but not one of them had arrived at a satisfactory diagnosis of her case. And he had called upon me. Would I come and examine, and pass my judgment? I told him I would.

On the morrow I rode over to Foxborough, and easily found Mr. Gregory's house. It was one of the prettiest and most sensible looking dwellings in the place. And I found the sick girl in her chamber, dressed in a loose morning robe of violet colored cashmere, and reclining upon a lounge. She was nineteen years of age, of medium stature, and I thought at the time—as I think now—the fairest and most beautiful maiden I had ever seen. I was interested, and resolved that if help lay within my power it should be forthcoming. She evidently read my feelings, for she very soon evinced that my presence was not disagreeable to her. She had told her father that she did not care to see another physician; and this had been told to me, so that I was induced to approach her kindly and gently.

I will not trouble the reader with the particulars of my examination. Suffice it to say that from the patient herself I could gain nothing save that she was growing weaker and weaker every day and every hour. As for consumption, not one of the marked symptoms were present. Her lungs were sound and intact. I spent an hour with her, and engaged her in constant conversation, and I found that she had no hope of living. She was one who had made up her mind to droop and die. As I arose, at the end of the hours, she said to me, with a faint smile,—

“What do you think, Doctor?”

Her smile startled me. It seemed to say—“I trust you are not going to dispute me—*you* will not mock me by trying to help me.”

I answered her that I was not yet prepared to give an opinion. I wished, however, that she would allow me to remove the medicines which other physicians had ordered, as I was satisfied that they were doing her no good.

She thanked me with gushing gratitude. But—would I leave any medicine?

“For the present,” I told her, only a little wine. Had she any objection to that?

She had none at all.

In the hall I met her father. To his anxious inquiries I could only answer that I would call again on the morrow. I told him his daughter had no organic disease,—I was sure of it. This assurance gave him hope.

On the following day I saw Cordelia Gregory again, and spent another hour by her side.

And so, for a week, I visited her daily. I should have been less than human had I not, in that time, learned to love the sweet, gentle-natured girl. Had my heart been already another's, I should at least have given her a sister's place; but my heart had been all mine own until she possessed it. And in a week's time she had come to welcome me with a brighter kindling of the azure eyes, and a warmer flush of the fading cheeks. And yet, during all this time I had been utterly unable to analyze her disease. She was failing just as the rippling brooklet fails when its fountain is drying up.

It was on my seventh visit, that, as I sat by her side, with her hand in mine, her head dropped upon my shoulder. I was thrilled to the very centre of my being, and, without taking time to consider, I drew her nearer to my bosom, and eagerly cried,—

“Cordelia!—O, for my sake, live!—live!”

One of her hands crept up around my neck, and she answered,—

“I have not cared to live until now;—but it is too late!—too late!—I am dying—dying—dying!”

And she wept upon my bosom.

At that moment I knew that Cordelia Gregory was the victim of some frightful hallucination. Something was wearing her life away through her imagination. She had made up her mind to die, and nature was gradually, but surely, succumbing to the mental force. I dared not then question her. When I next joined her father I asked him if his daughter had any female friend whom she particularly trusted as a mate and a confidant.

There was one—a Mary Lakin—who had recently removed to a distant part of the State. She and Cordelia had been like sisters until within two months, when the removal of Mary had separated them.

“We must send for Mary Lakin,” I said; “and I must see her before she sees our patient.”

Mr. Gregory was ready to do anything. Mary Lakin was sent for, and she came—a bright-faced, true-hearted girl—just such an one as I should have supposed would win the confidence and love of Cordelia. I sat down with her, and gave her to understand what I wished. She started when I told her what I thought was the matter with her friend, and after a little reflection she laid her hand upon my arm and looked up earnestly into my face.

“Doctor,” she said, “I am reminded of a circumstance which had almost slipped from my memory; but your fears for Cordelia bring it back very vividly to my mind.”

And then she told me as follows: Nearly a year before a band of gypsies had been encamped upon the outskirts of the town, and of their number there was an old sibyl—a dark-eyed, weird-faced woman, whose whole make-up was awe-inspiring and mysterious—a woman who told fortunes, and concerning whom wonderful stories were related.

“One day,” went on Mary, “a party of us visited the gypsy camp, and the sibyl intercepted us. I allowed her to tell my fortune, and others of the party did the same. She not only prognosticated for the future, but she told things of the past with marvelous accuracy. At length she approached Cordelia, but the girl would not submit. The sibyl persisted, and Cordelia resolutely refused, at the same time declaring that the calling was an impious one. At length the beldam, in a spiteful way, drew forth from her bosom a bit of reed, like a bit of dried catnip stalk, and having split it she took therefrom a pellet of paper, which she gave to Cordelia, bidding her take it home with her, and not to look at it save in the privacy of her own chamber. Then the old woman hobbled off, and out attention was immediately attracted by a glee-girl.

“Several times I asked Cordelia what she found in the paper the sibyl had given her; but she never gave me a direct answer, though she would have had me believe that the thing amounted to nothing at all. I remember it all very well now; and I can also remember that the last time I spoke to her of the gypsy’s pellet, she started as though the subject gave her pain; and of course I did not refer to it again.”

“Go to Cordelia,” I said, “and find out what was in that paper. Do not use my name. Let her not know that you have seen me. Your revelation gives me the light of a new hope. Go,—and make no failure.”

On the following day I met Mary Lakin in Mr. Gregory’s parlor. She had found the paper.

“I have acted both traitor and thief,” she said, as she put out her hand. “First I won Cordelia’s confidence by a pledge of secrecy; and next I stole this paper from a secret compartment of her writing-desk.”

“And this,” said I, “is the paper which the gypsy gave her?”

“The very same.”

Mary gave it to me, and I took it in my fingers and opened it. It was a triangular bit of letter paper, much worn and soiled, and it bore characters written in brilliant vermilion ink. The writing was cramped, but plain and distinct, and this is what was written:

“Maiden, now so bright and fair,
Of the future take no care,—
Within the twelvemonth next to come
Thine earthly pilgrimage is done.
Bear in mind the mystic date,—
No power on earth can change thy fate!
“Sixth month,—Fifth day,—1848.”

I read the strange missive, and reread it, and then looked at Mary Lakin.

“I remember it all very well,” she said. “It was on the Fifth day of June, one year ago, that we were at the gypsy camp.”

“And this is the paper which the sibyl gave to Cordelia?”

“Yes.”

“And Cordelia believes it is true?”

“Yes. She has told me that she shall die before the day therein set down is passed.”

I saw it all now. The poor girl had hidden that fatal augury away, and had allowed it to occupy her mind until it had gained entire ascendancy. She had brooded over it in fear and trembling, and, all unconsciously, her finely strung and sensitive nature had fallen a prey to the terrible influence.

“Today,” said I, “is the twenty-ninth of May. If left to herself Cordelia will die before the fifth day of June is passed. She is so far a passive victim under the fatal shadow of that augury. We must get her over that fifth day alive. If we can do that she is saved.”

“How can we do it?” asked Mary.

“Will you help me?”

“To the very last possibility of my power,” was her heartfelt reply.

“Then,” said I, “you shall be her nurse. Let her know nothing of our meeting; and, above all, hint not that I know of this sibyl’s augury.”

This twenty-ninth day of May was a Tuesday, and the fifth of June would come in just one week—the very next Tuesday.

On Wednesday I visited my patient, and she introduced me to her dear friend Mary Lakin; and we acted our parts so well that she suspected not that we had met before. She said that Mary would remain with her. Of course I was glad. I had prepared, with great care, a sleeping potion as powerful as I dared to administer; and I had furthermore taken Mr. Gregory into my confidence, and also the old nurse, a family relative.

“Tonight,” said I in my final charge to Mary, “do you keep Cordelia awake as much as possible, and before daybreak give her the sleeping mixture. Watch her narrowly, and let no noise be made in the house.”

As I had directed, Mary Lakin suffered no sleep to visit her patient’s eyes until well on toward Thursday morning, when, at three o’clock, she administered the opiate in a bit of spiced wine. In a short time Cordelia fell asleep, and the little emantel clock, upon the dressing-case, was stopped. When the day broke the room was thoroughly darkened, and the hush of midnight reigned. She slept until five o’clock on that Thursday afternoon, and as she gave signs of awaking the clock was set agoing. Her nurse sat just as she had sat fourteen hours before.

“Have you been asleep, Cordelia?”

The patient sat up and looked around.

“Is this you, Mary?”

“Yes.”

“What time is it?”

“Why—are you wandering? You have just taken your wine. Do you want some more?”

Cordelia looked at the clock. The rays of the nurse-lamp fell upon its face, and she saw that it was past three.

“I thought I had slept,” she said.

Mary laughed, and told her she had had no time to sleep.

Presently the patient asked for drink, and another opiate was administered.

In this way we brought her over to Friday morning, and she had lost a day. It was the morning of the first day of June, and she thought it was Thursday, the last day of May!

I was sure she could safely bear a repetition of the experiment; and, moreover, I was anxious to be as far on the safe side as possible. During this Friday, which she thought to be Thursday, I administered invigorating diet and cordials; and during this same Friday night Mary Lakin continued to keep her charge awake as before. At half past three, on Saturday morning, the opiate was administered, in a draught for which the patient had called of her own accord, and a sound sleep was the result. The clock was stopped, and the windows battened, and all in the house put upon orders of silence.

The sleep lasted until past two o'clock of Saturday afternoon, at which time Cordelia awoke, finding Mary by her side, with the goblet in her hand. The nurse-lamp was burning lowly, its rays falling upon the dial of the clock, which was now ticking away at the hour of four.

As before Mary adroitly led her charge to believe that since taking the draught she had only dropped off into a momentary doze, and that it was now four o'clock in the morning. Cordelia asked for more drink, and thus an opportunity was offered for giving the last opiate, which I had prepared with the utmost care and precision.

Cordelia slept again, and awoke not until the dawning of the Sabbath morning. She had lost another day, and thought full sure that the morning beams were for the ushering in of Friday. Mr. Gregory had made arrangement with the sextons of the two village churches that the Sabbath bells should not be rung; so the day passed, and the patient dreamed not how the time had slipped away. She was living through Sunday, the Third day of June, and she believed it to be only Friday, the First day of June.

On Monday I administered cordials stimulating and invigorating. Tuesday, the Fated Day, came, and Cordelia tried to smile as we gave her assurance of returning health. But her smiles were of resignation, not of hope.

On Tuesday evening, which to her mind was the evening of Sunday, she held my hand, and asked me to be with her on the morrow.

“Tomorrow,” she said, “is the Fourth of June. I would like to have those whom I love near me on that day. I shall be permitted to spend that day with them; but I may not spend another!”

I kissed her upon the brow, and promised that I would obey.

Wednesday morning came,—the Sixth day of June—bright, calm, and beautiful. By my directions Mary had administered a generous stimulant, and our patient was feeling the thrill of a new energy. It was near the middle of the forenoon, and Mr. Gregory and Mary Lakin and myself were in the cheerful chamber to which the golden glories of that June sun had admitted.

Cordelia was in a large easy-chair, and by Mary's persuasions she had suffered herself to be arrayed in one of her prettiest wrappers—a French silk, with violet ground, and wrought with flowers in green and crimson and gold. I sat by her side, and of her own accord she had given me one of her hands. Mary Lakin was at a little distance upon the other side, while her father sat before her.

“My darling,” said Mr. Gregory, with a bright smile upon his kindly face, “I want you to gain strength and get well before your birthday, because Dr. Bunton and myself have planned a grand festival for the occasion.”

“Ah!” replied Cordelia, with a shake of the head, “that day is too far away for me to reach it.”

“Only tomorrow,” said her father.

“You mistake, my dear father. My birthday is the Seventh of June.”

“Exactly, my blessed one.”

“And today,” said Cordelia, “is only the Fourth.”

“Now, my child, it is you who mistake. Today is the Sixth.”

“This is Monday?”

“No,—this is Wednesday.”

She looked bewildered; and after gazing for a time into her father's face, she turned to me. It had been left for me to assure her. I drew her hand upon my bosom, and held it there within both mine own.

“Cordelia,” I said, “pardon us for the means we have adopted for showing you how foul and false are all unholy spells cast by impious lips upon that current of life which God alone directs. Your father tells you truly. Today is Wednesday, the Sixth day of June. We have taken you over two days without your knowledge. You slept long, long hours when you knew it not. It was the Gypsy sibyl who lied. Yesterday was the fated Fifth of June, and yet here you are, bright and well, with God's own blessed sunlight round about you, as the sunlight of ten thousand joys shall make radiant your path in the future!”

In a little time she comprehended the whole. The fatal day was past and gone, and yet she lived and was blessed. I had expected that she would stretch out her arms to her father, and had released her hand that she might do so; but, no. When the full light had burst upon her, she turned to me, and pillowed her head upon my bosom, and wound her arms around my neck.

She rested upon my bosom on that blessed June day of the other years; and this same bosom is her resting-place today; and my strong arms still entwine her, and hold her close; and as I kiss her, and gaze into her face, I meet the sweet and loving smile of one of the truest and noblest companions that ever made man's pathway bright and blissful.

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