

THE LAST PROJECT

EDNA LANEY

IN OUR MANY YEARS together Bert and I faced many trials, but working together, we managed to bring to successful conclusion all the projects that come with a good marriage. We raised seven children while budgeting for college and missions. (Our sixth missionary was in the field; our sixth college student was at BYU.) We had made the gospel a vital and important part of our lives, had endeavored to be active in the community and to spread the light of Christ wherever we were. Because Bert was a statistician, each project had been carefully planned and executed as near to the plan as possible. But now we would need all the faith and courage we could muster for our final project. As he leaned against the pillows and smiled at me, I returned his smile. Though I was filled with terror at the thought of life without him, I knew his need for comfort was greater than mine, and so my chin never even quivered.

With paper and pencil he began the planning. It was a familiar routine. He tried to cover all possibilities, to plan for every contingency. His first impulse had been to keep his condition a secret, but that would mean evasion, even outright lies. After some thought, we decided it would be easier for us to tell the truth. So we sat close together and worked on the plans for what he came to call, "Our honeymoon in reverse." Instead of knitting our lives together, we would now begin to unwind the strands and go our separate ways. My smile grew stiff, but his pencil never wavered.

"I've been trying to show people how a Latter-day Saint lives. Now I will show them how one dies," he said. I went to my next door neighbor and asked her to tell the other neighbors. I called the other children; I wrote to our missionary son and we informed the Bishop and special friends.

We both agreed that the hospital, with its emphasis on life at any cost, with its needles, tubes and machines, would only prolong his suffering. I shuddered at the thought that I could be prevented from sharing his final moments by some well meaning doctor or nurse. So with our own doctor's

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approval, we made plans to keep him at home. Bert worried about the problems I might face, but I was able to convince him that I was strong enough to stand the stress. Besides, we belonged to a ward full of loving hands eager to do anything for us.

In the days that followed we made many decisions. We made our wills. He wished to be buried in his home town of St. George, Utah, so we went to the mortuary to make funeral arrangements. He selected pall bearers and the speakers for the program; then he went on leave from his office and resigned other official duties. He cleaned out drawers and files. I bought his burial clothes and read countless books on death, dying and the problems of widowhood. We were still working our shift at the temple, though, because he wanted to continue as long as he could. In the meantime, we tried to make life as normal as possible.

During all this time Bert never said, "Why me?" He seemed to be entirely willing for God's will to be done. In his methodical fashion he made himself ready for what was to come. He never ceased to thank the Lord for his blessings and to ask for help and strength.

As Christmas neared, we prepared for the holidays partly by reciting a riddle: "What do you give a man for Christmas when he is dying?" We both thought about this for awhile. Bert's answer: "Vanishing Cream." I bought him an SX-70 camera (no waiting to develop the pictures) and then, after much thought, I gave him scriptures on tape. It would make it easier for him when he became too weak to hold a book.

Our many long talks brought us closer in mind and purpose than we had ever been before. We told each other things that in the ordinary course of life we might never have said. Each day was filled with special purpose. Each hour, each act had vital meaning. Each evening I said, "Will you be here tomorrow?" and he replied, "I think so." Each morning one of us would remark, "Well we have another day together."

Strangely enough, we were not depressed. Our home was a place of faith, hope, love and even laughter. Once, when I brought in an armload of his clean shirts, he looked at them and said, "Golly, that's enough shirts to last me the rest of my life." When he realized what he had said, we both managed to laugh.

One of the intimate customs of our married life was my habit of grabbing Bert hard and proclaiming dramatically, "You are my prisoner, and you cannot get away." One day when I playfully pinned his poor bony shoulders to the bed, he gave me a sly wink, and said "Oh, yes I can." Once when we were wrangling, amiably, over something I had proposed to do, he said, laughing, "Over my dead body." I burst into tears.

While discussing arrangements for the funeral, he asked me if I thought I should leave for St. George the same day and bury him the next. I said I thought we had better stay over a day because we would all be dead by the time we got there. "Like me?" he asked.

Some of my friends counseled me. "Never let him see you cry," but I wanted him to know I cared deeply, so I watered his chest nearly every day

until the withdrawal stage. Then I tried not to intrude on his thoughts which were no longer of me or of this world.

Christmas came and most of the children were home. It was a happy time, with a great thread of sadness through everything we did. Bert joined us as much as he could. He would be up for a few moments and then would retreat to his bed, only to come out again a few minutes later. We tried to keep everything the same: the Christmas Eve program, the big Christmas dinner (with three desserts) and the visits from friends.

Bert took the opportunity to have a private interview with each child, giving each a father's blessing recorded on tape. He also made a tape for each of the absent boys. One evening he had interviews with the grandchildren, beginning with the oldest teen age girl and moving down to the youngest, a year-old boy. To those old enough to understand, he talked about death. He told them that he had been called to work for the Lord on the other side of the veil. Assuring them of his continued love, he promised that wherever he was he would think of them and look out for their welfare. The tiny ones were given last hugs and kisses from the grandfather they would one day be unable to remember.

Soon it was time for the children to go. Words cannot describe the feelings of each as final kisses were given, hugs, loving words, a last reluctant closing of the door. Bert braced himself in the bay window as each car with its precious cargo faded from sight. One last wave and he went off to bed. From then on we were alone.

It soon became apparent that Bert would have to train his replacement at the temple. The day he cleaned out his locker and took "indefinite leave," we walked out arm in arm. "It is the end of an era," I said. He looked straight ahead, too overcome to speak. We sat a moment in the car looking at the temple through the windshield. Then slowly, wearily, he put the car in motion. It was the last time he would drive a car.

When President Eames came to the house to present a certificate of release from the temple, Bert held the paper in his hands and stared at it, an omen he could not ignore. "The time is getting close," he said. "When you are released from one position, they do not wait long to give you a new assignment." From then on he would frequently say, "I wonder what my new assignment will be," or "I wonder where they will send me." One day he said, "Would you be frightened if you woke up some morning and found me dead?" I said, "Of course not." I hadn't been resting much before; now it became almost impossible to close my eyes.

Each day he grew thinner and weaker, but he fought to live. He spent much time trying to force down food. He would take a bite and tell me how bad he felt that he could not eat it. We had made a pact that we would try not to keep things from each other. Now we broke the agreement. I failed to tell him that the dryer was out of order. He tried to convince me that he was not hungry and was feeling only mild discomfort.

About this time friends began to bring messages for loved ones on the other side. He would listen carefully to each message, promising that if he saw the deceased ones, he would surely remember to tell them what was said.

And then he worried that he might not be able to remember all the messages. I encouraged him by assuring him that he was still mentally competent.

Many friends who came to console left inspired and uplifted. Still we had our dark moments and times of despair. We were praying each day for his release. Death became our all consuming wish. It hurt so to see him suffer, but he never complained. To me he would admit to having "discomfort," but to those who came to see him he was always, "Just fine."

Since our doctor was in Baltimore, I suggested that he make out the death certificate in advance and send it to me. I would fill in the day and hour. When the certificate came, Bert spent quite a long time reading it. He said, "Not many men get to read their own death certificate." He asked for a mirror to study his skeleton face. I agreed that I would not care to meet such a face, suddenly, some dark night. He named himself "Boneypart." I could now put my thumb and middle finger about his wrist.

Bert was still in charge, though he refused to let me get a nurse. He struggled to the bathroom; he forced himself into the tub each day. He said it made him feel better. I did him the courtesy of allowing him to do whatever he wished. With my help he managed to care for himself until the day before he died.

He often said how glad he was that he was home and not in the hospital. He would call me the best nurse in the world, and would add, "I hate to be a nuisance," or "You must be getting tired of taking care of me." When he finally offered to go to the hospital, I assured him that I would rest when his time had come. When I reminded him that this was our last project and that we would see it through together, he sighed with relief.

I do not pretend it was not hard, but there was a spirit in our home that brought confidence and peace to our hearts. He talked about his parents and expressed a wish that he might be "home" for his birthday, the first of March. I could see he was moving away from me emotionally just when I needed comfort more than ever. His mind was fixed on the world to come. He had reached the withdrawal stage. Because of what I had read, I understood it, but in many ways found it the hardest to bear.

Finally, he was in so much pain that I was giving him shots of morphine every few hours, and he was now too weak to lift his head from the pillow. I bathed him and changed the sheets. I cut the neck of a white shirt and put it on him. It made a passable bed gown. I had removed his garments and put away his slippers. We both knew he would not be out of bed again. When I finished I leaned over and kissed him. "We haven't far to go now," I said. "It is almost finished."

"I'm ready," he replied. He stared at the ceiling and then at the clock.

"What are you looking for?" I asked. He did not reply. I knew he was watching for someone to come for him. Finally he seemed to sleep.

It was evening again as I sat in the living room talking to my stake president. The couch faced the stairs and hall. A dim light filtered out of the bedroom. Suddenly I saw the hall fill with forms. One of them beckoned to me. I excused myself and went up the stairs. The hall and bedroom were filled with forms who moved aside as I neared the bed.

Bert was gasping, his eyes closed. I took his hand. I thought of the others downstairs but decided that this was a moment for just Bert and me and those almost unseen guests who were there to welcome him. He struggled for breath. Twice he seemed to stop breathing but then resumed his pitiful wheezing. When I heard a rattle, a gurgle in his throat, I knew what it was. I had read about it in books. Dry eyed, I held his hand while he breathed his last, feeling triumph that we had successfully completed our last project together.

I said, "You are dead now, Honey. You've made it." I stood for what seemed a long time and talked to him, sure that he could hear all I said and all that I thought. Then I went to tell my guests that he would be home for his birthday.

His agony was over, but mine would continue. Now I began to understand why old people often die soon after a companion is taken. I see why it is possible for some who lack a firm faith to do away with themselves. But I struggle to remain filled with faith. I try to see that his cruel death had special meaning and purpose for us both.

Bert and I made plans for my life without him. He wanted me to finish college and do the traveling I loved. He set standards of faith and bravery that I find hard to reach. Now, as I study and travel and continue my work in the temple, I strive to fill my life with interesting projects. I try to think of ways to help others. There is so much I have learned; there is so much more I must learn. With Bert's example before me and the gospel to guide me, I cannot fail.

