

THE LAST LEAF

To Greenwich Village, which is a section of New York City, many people came who were interested in art. They liked the bohemian life of the village, and they enjoyed living among so many artists. The buildings and apartments were often very old and dirty, but this only added to the interest of the place.

At the top of an old three-storey brick house Sue and Johnsy had their studio. One of them was from the state of Maine, the other from California. They had met in the restaurant of an Eighth Street hotel. Both were artists who had recently come to New York to make their living.

That was in May. In November, a cold, unseen stranger, whom the doctors called pneumonia, visited the city, touching one here and one there with his icy finger.

He touched Johnsy and she lay, scarcely moving, on her painted iron bed, looking through the small window at the blank wall of the opposite building.

One morning the busy doctor invited Sue into the hall.

"She has about one chance in ten to live", he" said as he shook down the 'mercury in his clinical thermometer. "And that one chance depends upon her desire to get better. But your little friend has made up her mind that she is going to die. Is she worrying about something?"

"She wanted to paint a picture of the Bay of Naples some day", said Sue.

"No, something more important — a man perhaps?"

"No."

"Well, perhaps it is a result of her fever and her general physical weakness. But when a patient begins to feel sure that she is going to die, then I subtract fifty per cent from the power of medicines. If you can succeed in making her interested in something, in asking, for instance, about the latest styles in women's clothes, then I can promise you a one-to-five chance for her instead of one-to-ten."

After the doctor had gone, Sue went into her own room and cried. Later, trying not to show her sadness, she went into Johnsy's room, whistling.

Johnsy lay under the bedclothes, with her face toward the window. Sue stopped whistling, thinking Johnsy was asleep. But soon Sue heard a low sound, several times repeated. Sue went quickly to the bedside.

Johnsy's eyes were wide open. She was looking out of the window, and counting

backwards.

"Twelve", she said, and a little later, "eleven", and then "ten" and "nine" and then "eight" — "seven."

Sue looked out of the window. What was Johnsy counting? There was only a gray, back yard and the blank wall of the opposite house. An old, old vine, dead at the roots, climbed halfway up the wall. The cold breath of autumn had blown almost all the leaves from the vine until its branches were almost bare.

"What is it, dear?" asked Sue.

"Six" said Johnsy very quietly. "They are falling faster now. Three days ago there were almost a hundred. It makes my head ache to count them. But now it's easy. There goes another one. There are only five left now."

"Five what, dear? Tell me!" said Sue.

"Leaves. The leaves of that vine. When the last leaf of the vine falls, I must go too. I've known that for three days. Didn't the doctor tell you?"

"The doctor didn't say any such thing. That is pure foolishness", said Sue. "What connection have those old leaves with your getting well? And you used to love that old vine so much. Please don't be silly! The doctor told me this morning that your chances of getting well soon were excellent. Now try to take some of your soup and let me get back to work so that I can make money to buy you some good port wine."

"There's no use buying any more wine", said Johnsy, keeping her eyes fixed on the blank wall of the house opposite. "There goes another leaf. That leaves just four. I want to see the last one fall before it gets dark. Then I'll go too."

"Johnsy, dear," said Sue, bending over her. "Will you promise me to keep your eyes closed and not look out of the window until I have finished working? I must deliver these drawings tomorrow. I need the light; otherwise I would pull down the curtain."

"Can't you draw in your room?" said Johnsy coldly.

"I'd rather stay here with you", said Sue. "Besides, I don't want you to keep looking at those silly leaves."

"Tell me as soon as you have finished", said Johnsy, closing her eyes and lying white and still. "Because I want to see the last leaf fall. I'm tired of waiting. I'm tired of thinking."

"Try to sleep", said Sue a little later. "I must go downstairs for a minute to get Mr. Behrman who is going to sit as my model. But I will be right back. And don't move and also please promise me not to look out of the window,"

Old Mr. Behrman was a painter who lived on the first floor beneath them. He was more than sixty years old. Behrman was a failure in art. He had always wanted to paint a masterpiece, but he had never yet begun to paint it. For many years he had painted nothing, except now and then something in the line of commercial or advertising work. He earned a little money by serving as a model for those young artists who could not pay the price for a regular model. He drank much whiskey and when he was drunk always talked about the great masterpiece he was going to paint. He was a fierce, intense little man who considered himself as a watch-dog and protector for the two young artists living above him, of whom he was very fond.

Sue found Behrman in his poorly-lighted studio. In one corner of the room stood a blank canvas which had been waiting for twenty-five years to receive the first line of the promised masterpiece. Sue told him of the strange idea which Johnsy had concerning the last leaf, and Sue said that she feared that Johnsy would really die when the last leaf fell.

Old Behrman shouted, "Are there people in the world who are foolish enough to die simply because leaves fall from an old vine? I have never heard of such a thing. Why do you permit such silly ideas to come into her mind? Oh, that poor little Miss Johnsy."

"She is very ill and very weak", explained Sue, "and the fever has left her mind full of strange ideas."

Johnsy was sleeping when they both went upstairs. Sue pulled down the curtain and motioned to Behrman to go into the other room. There they looked out of the window fearfully at the vine. Then they looked at each other for a moment without speaking. A cold rain was falling, mixed with snow. Behrman took a seat and prepared himself to pose for Sue as a model.

When Sue woke up the next morning, she found Johnsy with dull, wide open eyes, looking at the window.

"Put up the curtain. I want to see", Johnsy said quietly.

Sue obeyed.

But, oh, after the heavy rain and the strong wind, one leaf was still hanging on the vine. The last leaf. Still dark green, it hung from a branch some twenty feet above the ground."

"It is the last one", said Johnsy, "I thought it would surely fall during the night. I heard the wind and the rain. It will fall today and I shall die at the same time."

"Dear Johnsy", said Sue, placing her face close to Johnsy's on the pillow. "Think of me if you won't think of yourself. What shall I do?"

The day passed slowly, and even through the growing darkness of the evening they could see the lone leaf still hanging from the branch against the wall. And then, with the coming of the night, the wind began to blow again, and the rain began to fall heavily.

„ But the next morning when Johnsy commanded that the curtain be raised again, the leaf was still there.

Johnsy lay for a long time looking at it. And then she called to Sue.

"I've been a bad girl, Sue", said Johnsy. "Something has made the last leaf stay there just to show me how bad I was. It was a sin to want to die. You may bring me a little soup now — and then put some pillows behind me and I will sit up and watch you cook."

An hour later Johnsy said, "Sue some day I want to paint a picture of the Bay of Naples."

The doctor came in the afternoon. "You are doing fine", he said, taking Johnsy's thin hand in his. "In another week or so you will be perfectly well. And now I must go to see another patient downstairs.

His name is Behrman. He is some kind of artist, I believe. Pneumonia, too. He is an old, weak man, and the attack is very severe. There is no hope for him, but I am sending him to the hospital in order to make him more comfortable."

The next day, Sue came to the bed where Johnsy lay. "The doctor tells me that soon you will be perfectly well again", Sue said, putting her arm around Johnsy. Johnsy smiled at her happily.

"Isn't it wonderful?" Sue continued. "But now I have something important to tell you. Old Mr. Behrman died in the hospital this morning of pneumonia. He was sick only two days. They found him in his room the morning of the first day helpless with pain and fever. His shoes and clothing were completely wet and icy cold. They couldn't figure out where he had been on such a terrible night. And then they found a lantern, still lighted, a ladder, and some other things which showed that, during the wind and the rain, he had climbed up and painted a green leaf on the wall of the house opposite. Didn't you think it was strange that the leaf never moved when the wind blew. Ah, darling, it was Behrman's real masterpiece, — he painted it there the night that the last leaf fell".

O. Henry

William Sydney Porter

(1862—1910)