

JEAN.

Little Jean D'Orsay came into the studio one fine May evening, bringing with her a gleam of outside light, and the scent of violets.

"I have come for a long talk, Octavia," she said. "I have much to say, and you have much to listen to. Where is my old friend our home-made couch? Oh, there it is pushed away back in that dark corner. Octavia, how could you treat my handiwork with so little dignity?" Then she pulled away with her pretty hands until the couch with its worn chintz covering and cushions was placed to her liking in the broad window, and she comfortably established thereon. The warm, golden beams of the setting sun rested lovingly on her sweet face.

"And so, my dear," I said with a sigh of content, for I was very glad to have my Jean home once more, after an absence of many weeks, "you are really to be married! I only heard the rumor, as true, the other day, and have waited for your own lips to tell me all about it, and as many of the secrets of love-making as you will confide to an old-maid's keeping."

"Oh, yes, I am engaged," she answered carelessly; "but, Octavia, if you are pining for love secrets, I have none to tell. Surely you know as well as I do that it was all arranged long ago, before papa died. It was his dearest wish that I should marry the Baron von Stock, and abroad we are taught to obey our fathers, even though they die and leave us; and even without that, we D'Orsays never break our word."

She said this simply and as a matter of course, taking off her rings one by one and making a little row of them on the top of the couch. She was very young, only just seventeen, but there was a ring of proud truth in her voice that showed that she had learned her lesson well.

"Yes, I know, child," I answered with another sigh, not so tranquil as my former one; "only, you see, I can neither understand nor believe in such a keeping of one's word. Here, in America, generally a girl marries for one of two reasons; either because she loves, or because she is poor and needs a home. The latter can never be your case; then, Jean, do you love the Baron von Stock?"

Jean shrugged her shoulders. "He is fifty," she said, "and has gray hairs, and I am just seventeen, and, you know summer and winter can never agree. But I am a D'Orsay."

"D'Orsay or not D'Orsay," I replied shortly, "I do not believe in any such nonsense. Jean, do you realize what you are giving up in marrying a man you do not love?"

"I think I do, Octavia."

"Is there then some one you do love, Jean?"

A long pause following my question, during which Jean put on slowly the shining little circlets that belonged to her slim fingers. Then she said in a troubled voice: "Octavia, that is just what I have come to tell you!"

A peremptory knock at the door, followed by the immediate entrance and familiar voice of my favorite, Denis Durant, interrupted Jean's little confession.

"Are you here, Madam Octavia, all alone in the gloaming? And may I come in?"

"Come in and welcome, Denis, but when did you arrive? Your last letter said nothing of your intention to return so soon. You were on your way to Florida, then. Did you weary of the sunny South? or were the Florida girls less winning and beautiful than you expected?"

"No and yes, Madam Octavia. As to the Florida girls, fortunately for me they did not make up my entire community, for I had other things to think about."

Denis crossed the long studio, and now stood beside us where we sat in the quick coming shadow. I turned to Jean to make them known to one another.

"Jean," I said, "this is your one rival in my affections; Denis, this is your only compeer in my heart."

I had proceeded thus far, when I was shaken out of my usual calm by a little gasping noise from among the cushions. Dennis started forward, and to my utter dismay and astonishment, I saw him seize Jean's hands and cover them with eager kisses, while he said in a broken voice:

"You here, my darling! why, I thought—I never knew you and Madam Octavia were friends."

Then Jean's frightened little voice: "Oh, please you must not. Oh, Octavia tell Mr. Durant all about it."

"Tell Mr. Durant all about it," I echoed; "indeed, I think it is you two should make explanation to me."

And so by degrees they told me. It was the same old story that is forever and ever repeating itself. They had met in Florida, gone sight-seeing and pleasure-seeking together until, as a foregone conclusion, they had come to love one another; and then—why, then came Jean's summons home, followed by her formal betrothal to the Baron von Stock.

"She never let me know, Madam Octavia," said poor Denis, "where she was going, or why. Did she suppose I held her love so lightly won and so lightly lost? What if she is engaged to Baron von Stock, and bound by all the betrothals in Christendom, it doesn't matter in the least. No guardian can dispose of a girl that way in this country. Jean, I tell you it shall not be. Don't you believe me Jean?"

But Jean was sobbing quietly to herself, her face buried in her hands, only the soft dark fringe of hair upon her brow visible.

"Jean," I said at last "surely there is no cause for all these tears. It is quite simple; what Denis says is more or less true; the Baron will never hold you unwilling to your word. Be frank with him, my dear; it is always the best way to be honest."

"You do not know," she answered lifting her tea-drenched face into the moonlight that now streamed in soft effulgence through the open window. What it means to us to have plighted our troth. It is only a very little less binding than a marriage vow, and I, above all others, must not break mine; for, do you not know my dying father promised for me, and I may not soil his honor, though I might my own?"

And from this we could not move her. Denis was in despair, and I not less moved, for I loved these two children dearly, and in my secret heart had cherished the hope that they might one day become something nearer and dearer than friends.

Jean sobbed on a little longer, while Denis held one unresisting hand, and the kindly shadows of the calm May night wrapped us all in soft obscurity. Presently there came the sound of wheels and the tramping of horses in the quiet street below, and then my little maid appeared with her hissing message: "Baron von Stock was waiting for Miss D'Orsay."

So Jean dried her tears, put her hat over her dark ruffled hair gave her hand calmly to Denis, kissed me hastily, and then we were left alone. The horses pranced below, and through the evening air came Jean's plaintive voice. Then the rolling wheels growing fainter in the distance, and then—silence.

"Denis," I said at length, "don't give her up."

"Don't give her up, Madam Octavia," he replied; "but what can I do? It is her that gives me up. What can I do?"

"Go to her guardian, Mr. Haviland, and tell him. If he has any remnant of youth left in his heart, he will try and help you."

This I said, not unmindful of Denis's good family, good looks, and his great wealth. He brightened somewhat at this suggestion, and left me, later on, more willing to see some hope for the future.

I did not see either of my children for some days after that evening; indeed, I think two weeks had gone by; but each day saw me so busy employed with my pupils and an amount of extra work, that I scarcely realized the flight of time.

One afternoon quite late, as I sat correcting a very much out-of-drawing study Jean came in. I did not look up, but welcomed her from my easel; she came across the room silently, and stood before me without speaking.

"Well, my dear," I said, rubbing out a stream with a bit of bread, "it's a long time since you gladdened my eyes, with a sight of your winsome face."

Then, as she did not answer, I looked up. She was standing directly in front of me, with the light from the north window full upon her. Her dress was a long soft white mull, with a breast-knot of dark Russian violets; she held her hat in her hand, and her soft dark hair lay slightly moist upon her forehead. But it was none of those accessories that drew from me the startled exclamation:

"Jean, what have you been doing to yourself?" For she was perfectly colorless with a pallor that betokened sleepless nights and restless days, while all the tiny blue veins about her temples were plainly visible, and beneath her sweet eyes were dark purple shadows. She gave a little laugh.

"Oh, nothing, Octavia, unless breaking one's heart can be called an occupation. I have been doing that."

"Then you are very foolish," I said. "Why should you break your heart, and some one else as well, when the remedy lies in your own hands?"

She made no answer at first, trifling in a nervous way with the feathers on her hat. Then in a troubled voice: "Is it Denis you mean Octavia?"

"Who else should it be?" I answered, "Break your own heart if you will, child, but you might have spared my boy's."

I spoke quickly and in temper, but I grieved when I had said it. The girl started as if wounded, and gave a long, deep sigh, though she answered me quietly enough.

"Dear Madam Octavia, in deciding as I have, believe me I have not spared myself; but I did not come to you to say so I came because I am very miserable and all alone, and because I am motherless, and to ask you to give him—Denis—this," laying a little note on the ledge of my easel. "And now I will say good-bye, Octavia." She left me before I could speak, with the same hurt look on her face, and all that remained was the white note for Denis and one or two violets that had fallen from her dress as she moved away.

A few more days passed by, and Sunday morning, as I sat over my late tea and toast, the door opened and Jean came in.

"Have you forgiven me, my dear?" I asked, as I kissed her sweet mouth, remembering my hard words a few evenings ago.

"Oh, indeed, Octavia, I had nothing to forgive. Surely, if you may not speak your mind to me, who can? See, I have brought you these white lilacs, Octavia. Baron von Stock gave me such a large bunch of them yesterday, and at once I thought of you and the dear, dusty studio you know I always used to keep the old place brightened up a bit."

Then, as she separated the fragrant white flowers and arranged them in my two majolica vases, she asked in a shy voice:

"Have you seen Denis, Octavia?"

"No, my little Jean, but I sent him your note."

"Did you read it, Octavia?"

"My dear, no. I noticed it was unsealed, but fancied that an oversight; so I fastened it up tight and sent it on its way. You did not tell me to read it, Jean."

"It does not matter," she answered. Then after a little pause: "It was only to tell him, Octavia, that Baron von Stock and Mr. Haviland had decided it shall be on the 15th of June." I made no reply, though I knew it was her wedding day she strove to speak of so calmly.

She came and rested her hands upon my shoulders.

"You do not answer me, Octavia. Are you, then, so indifferent?"

"My child," I said, "since you have decided in your own heart what is best, why should I reply?"

"Yes, that is true." Then, kissing me: "I have tried, Octavia, indeed I have, to do all for the best. I love Denis—ah! how truly I do love him—but my word is pledged. What can I do?"

"Nothing," I answered dryly, "since you feel as you do."

And now it seemed to me the days fairly raced by in their eagerness to reach the 15th of June. I saw Denis frequently; Jean less often. The boy was overwhelmed with his first great sorrow. He would come and talk to me by the hour, tramping up and down the studio, rumping up his hair and repeating over and over how much he loved her—how cruel it all was.

"Why doesn't she tell Baron von Stock?" he said. "You don't suppose the man would force her to marry him against her will?"

"Why don't you tell him?" I answered.

"How can I do that? Can I go and tell the Baron that I feel sure Jean does not love him, and is only marrying him, because of her father's stupid promise, and some absurd nonsense about the family honor? Don't her very actions give me words the lie direct? Didn't I tell it to old Haviland, and much good did it do! He smiled at me as blandly as possible, and asked me if I came at Miss D'Orsay's request. Of course, I was obliged to say so. Then he smiled more blandly than before, and said: 'When Miss D'Orsay comes to me with the same petition, I will consider it.' Was there anything left for me to do, but take myself off after that?"

"No, I had to agree with him; there was nothing else left to do."

Now listen," continued Denis. "You are fond of me, you know, and it will consequently give you pleasure to do me a good turn. Jean will not see me, and I must see her before the 15th. Won't you try and get her here next Sunday afternoon, and then let me come in quite by accident? You will, won't you?"

"Denis Durant," I said solemnly, "since you were a curly-headed boy, I have never refused you anything it was in my power to grant. Am I likely to do so now? Yes, you shall have one more chance. I will ask Jean to come. And now be off; my six young ladies will be ere in less than ten minutes, and I shall lose my reputation as a stern instructor, if they catch sight of your handsome face."

"Pass me on as your model," said he impudently; then, coming back and putting his yellow head down caressingly: "You will make her come, Octavia?"

"Yes, yes," I answered, touching his bright locks, "do not fear; you shall see her once more."

This was Wednesday, the 5th of June: in ten days Jean was to be married. I wrote her a note asking her to come to me on Sunday. She sent me word she would be with me at five o'clock that afternoon; at six, Baron von Stock would call to take her to dine at his sister's where his relations were to meet her for the first time collectively.

Sunday came, one of those sudden intensely warm days, a foretaste of what July and August would prove. After my rather tardy luncheon, I drew the old chintz couch across the broad window, placed my low chair near the Venetian blinds, and waited for my lovers.

Denis came first, putting in his head cautiously, and then advancing eagerly when he saw I was alone.

"Will she come, Octavia? Am I too late?"

"She will come," I answered, and even as I made reply I heard her step upon the stairs. Denis drew back into the window, a moment, and then the door was slowly opened and Jean came in. She walked down the long room and we two watched her as she came. She was already dressed for dinner, in a long soft, white silk, made very simple, with some rich old lace at the throat, and short hanging sleeves. Her breast-knot was of her favorite dark Russian violets; her wavy brown hair knotted in some old-fashioned style upon the top of her proud little head, and held there by a quaint silver comb; in her hand she carried a white fan and her long white silk mittens, save for the deep blue of the violets, there was not a ray of color about her, and her face was as white as her gown.

I put out my hands to her as she drew near me; she took them in hers and, bending, kissed me twice. "You dear Octavia," she said, "how cool and calm and happy you look here. I never come that it does not do me good, and yet I always leave with a headache. Are you glad to see me, Octavia?"

"My little Jean, I am very glad. You do not come so often now my dear and I miss you very much."

"It is not my fault that keeps me away, Octavia," she said, using one of her foreign idioms, "but my weakness, I dare not come, for every time I do, my courage waxes fainter. You and the old studio are so full of pleasant, dear memories, and—of him."

"Jean, Jean my darling!" cried Denis, coming forth from his hiding and taking both her hands in his.

"Are you here?" she cried. Then beginning to tremble a little, and in a low voice, with now and then a sob: "Oh, Denis, you should not! Octavia, why did you let him come? Oh, my dear, dear Denis!"

It was all very sad, Jean stood there in her white, gleaming dress, sobbing, with Denis holding her hands in his, treating her in passionate tones to listen to the love of both their hearts.

"I cannot," she said faintly. "Oh, Denis, I cannot."

"Then you do not love me," cried he hoily.

"Love you," she answered. "Ah, you do not know how I love you. I love you more earnestly, more deeply, than it is possible for you to understand. But, oh! can't you see? It is not my promise I must keep, it is my father's. It will not greatly matter if my heart is broken," she added a little wildly, "so our honor is kept clean."

For a few moments there was a silence, then from out the gloom, far down the long studio, came a voice:

"Jean, mein liebling, art thou ready for me? Pardon, madame, that I intrude myself upon you."

Baron von Stock walked into our midst, and there was Jean, crying, and Denis holding both his hands.

"But what is this?" continued the Baron, turning his kind face from one to another. "Jean in tears! And you, sir," to Denis, "for what reason do you so hold Miss D'Orsay's hand?"

"For what reason?" cried Denis, glad to speak to some one in his excitement; "for the best of all reasons, Baron von Stock; because I love Jean, and she loves me. Don't you, my darling? Yes, I love her, and you will take her from me, because of some stupid promise long ago, made by a man dead two years. You want her to marry you, and she is not one to break her word. But, look you, I tell you she loves me, and it will only be her hand she gives you, not her heart: that is mine!"

The boy finished almost triumphantly, though he dropped Jean's hands and stood away from her. She said nothing.

"Is this true Jean?" asked the Baron slowly, with a look of pain in his face.

Thus questioned Jean looked up and answered.

"True that I love Denis? Yes, it is quite true, I should have told you Hermann, the day before our marriage, and I should also have told you, that as I took your name, so I should wear it blamelessly. You have never asked me, Baron von Stock, whether or not I loved you. You accepted my father's promise as I have done as I am willing to do."

As I watched the Baron, I saw a sudden look of happiness come over his face while Jean was speaking. My heart sank. Was he then willing to take her not only without love, but knowing her heart belonged to another? It seemed so, for as she finished he went close to her, and, taking her hand, raised courteously to his lips, bowing his gray head over with infinite grace.

"That is quite as it should be, mein liebling; I am only too happy to possess your amiable respect. And now shall we go? It is already late."

So, with a general bow, and leading my poor little Jean by the hand, he left us. As the door closed, Denis gave one low cry and flung himself down upon the couch. Nothing I could say would comfort him; he lay all the evening in dumb, wretched misery, while the dusk grew into night, and one by one out came the little stars, and last of all the full, round moon.

The 15th of June dawned fair and cloudless. I was up early, too full of my child's new life that was to begin to-day, to rest. She was to be married at Mr. Haviland's quietly, at 6 o'clock in the afternoon. I had a little note from her at mid-day, begging me not to fail to come, and saying at the end: "Dear Octavia, I know I am doing right, although my heart seems dead. Baron von Stock is very kind, and says I shall soon be all bright and happy again. And, indeed, I shall try and make his words seem true."

By 4 o'clock I was dressed in my best gray silk, with a bunch of white lilacs that Jean had sent me. I was carefully drawing on my gloves and beginning to rid myself mentally of the last of the desire to luxuriate in his grief, had declared it only his right to be at Jean's marriage, besides being his duty to look after me.

At half-past five he made his appearance.

"Oh, Denis," I cried, "how glad I am to see you. I feared, after all, you might not come."

He laughed—a sad, bitter laugh, not good to hear from so young a heart. "You should not fear, Madam Octavia. If she can endure it surely I can."

Then we betook ourselves to the carriage, and very soon were entering Mr. Haviland's drawing-rooms. These were gay with flowers and sweet June sunshine, and bright with happy faces. Were ours the only heavy hearts in that small gathering?

We took our places. Denis and I, so far from the white satin mat, richly embroidered with roses, which, as Madame de Vaux informed me, "had been brought especially from Germany for the bride and groom to stand upon. An old, old family custom, you know," she whispered energetically, "and so interesting."

We had not long to wait. There was a hush in the flow of many voices as Baron von Stock entered and took his place, followed immediately with Jean on Mr. Haviland's arm, I held my breath; Denis, who stood beside me, shivered. Very sweet and beautiful did my darling look, through her falling veil of rich lace could not hide from my eyes the real Jean beneath, and I noted with sharp anguish that her sweet face was thinner and the soft eyes more mournful than one short month ago. In direct contrast to her sad gentle looks was the too apparent joy not to say hilarity, of both Baron von Stock and Mr. Haviland. And now Jean reached the silken mat, old Mr. Dillon stood by in surplice and stole, and I was taking my last look at little Jean D'Orsay. The Baroness von Stock could never come to the old, dim, dusty studio and make it bright with her presence, talking for hours over every trifling pleasure or pain, as the old Jean had done.

My eyes were full of tears, for Jean was the child of a widowed heart, that had never known the sound of the magical word "mother." Even Denis's sorrow could not equal mine.

Baron von Stock's voice broke in upon my memories. "Mr. Haviland, and my very good friends," he was saying, "as you know it was the earnest desire and solemn promise of my friend, the late Count Alphonse D'Orsay, that there should, at a proper time, exist between me, Baron Hermann von Stock, and his only child and daughter, Jean Blanche D'Orsay, the tie and contract of marriage. And so great was this desire, however unworthy the recipient of his beauty, that he instilled into his daughter's generous heart the feeling that should she break his solemnly pledged word, she would not only soil his honor, but that of the D'Orsays whose race and lineage had never owned one member who had not kept it fair and clean. But to me he left discretionary powers, though he bound her so firmly, and should I, Hermann von Stock, desire at any time to cancel this mutual agreement I was to be free to do so. I do so desire now. In the presence of you all, I give back to Madam D'Orsay her freedom; not from any want of appreciation of her beauty, goodness and loyalty, rather because of them that I am an old man, and my love for her is too great to accept the sacrifice of her youth. Jean, mein lie-

ling, look up. See, I have brought thee a present, and we shall have a wedding after all."

When Jean raised her tear-dimmed eyes it was Denis's face they rested upon, Denis's hand that clasped so tightly round her own.

"To you, my friend," said the Baron more sternly, turning to the young man, "I say shield her faithfully, she who guards so faithfully a dead father's honor will not fail to cherish that of her husband."

Denis bowed his bright head in silent thanksgiving. And so they were married.

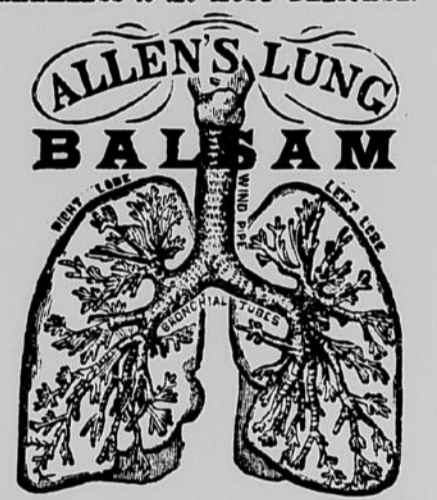
Often now on summer evenings the dim old studio is full of the joyous laughter and prattling tongues of little Denis and little Jean, pretty Blanche and baby Hermann. And when the shadows grow longer and the little spirits less buoyant, they gather about my knee and beg: "Once more, just once more, tell us the story of mamma's wedding day."—The Argosy.

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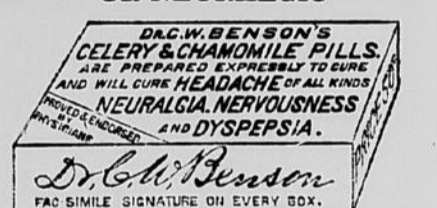
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