The last leaf (by O. Henry)

At the top of an old brick house in New York two young painters Sue and Johnsy had their studio. They had met in a cheap restaurant and soon discovered that though their characters differed, their views on life and art were the same. Some time later they found a room that was suitable for a studio and began to live even more economically than before.

That was in May. In November a cold, unseen stranger, whom the doctors called Pneumonia, went from place to place in the district where they lived, touching people here and there with his icy fingers. Mr Pneumonia was not what you would call a kind old gentleman. It was hardly fair of him to pick out a little woman like Johnsy who was obviously unfit to stand the strain of the suffering, but he did, and she lay on her narrow bed, with no strength to move, looking at the next brick house.

After examining Johnsy one morning the doctor called Sue out of the room and gave her a prescription, saying: "I don't want to frighten you, but at present she has one chance in, let us say, ten, and that chance is for her to want to live. But your little lady has made up her mind that she isn't going to get well, and if a patient loses interest in life, it takes away 50 per cent from the power of medicine. If you could somehow get her to ask one question about the new winter styles in hats, I would promise you a one-in-five chance for her."

After the doctor had gone, Sue went out into the hall and cried. As soon as she could manage to check her tears, she walked gaily back into the room, whistling a merry tune. Johnsy lay with her eyes towards the window. Thinking that Johnsy was asleep, Sue stopped whistling. She arranged her drawing board and began working. Soon she heard a low sound, several times repeated. She went quickly to the bedside. Johnsy's eyes were wide open. She was looking out of the window and counting — counting backward. "Twelve," she said, and a little later, "eleven;" then "ten" and "nine", and then "eight" and "seven" almost together.

Sue looked out of the window. What was there to count? There was only the blank side of the brick house twenty feet away. An old grape-vine climbed half way up the brick wall. The cold autumn winds had blown off its leaves until it was almost bare.

"What is it, dear?" asked Sue.

"Six," said Johnsy almost in a whisper. "They're falling faster now, I can hardly keep up with them. There goes another one. There are only five left now."

"Five what, darling? Tell me."

"Leaves. On the grape-vine. When the last one goes, I must go, too. I've known that for three days. Didn't the doctor tell you?"

"How can the doctor have told me this nonsense?" Sue said, trying to control her voice. "He told me this morning your chances were ten to one. Anyhow, let me finish my drawing so that I can sell it and buy some port wine for you."

"You needn't buy any more wine," said Johnsy with her eyes still on the window. "There goes another. 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. "I must go and call Behrman to be my model. Will you promise me to keep your eyes closed and not look at those leaves until I come back? I'll be back in a minute."

"Tell me when I may open my eyes," Johnsy said, "because I want to see the last one fall. I'm tired of waiting. I want to go sailing down like one of those poor tired leaves."

Old Behrman was a painter who lived on the ground floor below them. He was past sixty and had been a painter for forty years, but he hadn't achieved anything in art. However, he wasn't disappointed, and hoped he would some day paint a masterpiece. Meantime he earned his living by doing various jobs, often serving as a model to those young painters who could not pay the price of a professional. He sincerely thought it his duty to protect the two girls upstairs.

Sue found Behrman in his poorly-lighted room and told him of Johnsy's fancy, and that she didn't know how to handle the situation.
"I can't keep her from looking at those leaves! I just can't!" she cried out. "And I can't draw the curtains in the daytime. I need the light for my work!"

"What!" the old man shouted. "Why do you allow such silly ideas to come into her head? No, I won't pose for you! Oh, that poor little Miss Johnsy!"

"Very well, Mr Behrman," Sue said, "If you don't want to pose for me, you needn't. I wish I hadn't asked you. But I think you're a nasty old — old — " And she walked towards the door with her chin in the air.

"Who said I wouldn't pose?" shouted Behrman. "I'm coming with you. This isn't a place for Miss Johnsy to be ill in! Some day I'll paint a masterpiece, and we'll all go away!"

Johnsy was asleep when they went upstairs. Sue and Behrman looked out of the window at the grape-vine. Then they looked at each other without speaking. A cold rain was falling, mixed with snow. They started working...

When Sue woke up next morning, she found Johnsy looking at the drawn curtains with wide-open eyes.

"Open the curtains; I want to see!" she commanded in a whisper.

Sue obeyed.

The rain was beating against the windows and a strong wind was blowing, but one leaf still stood out against the brick wall. It was the last on the vine. It hung bravely from a branch about twenty feet above the ground.

The day wore away, and even through the twilight they could see the lonely leaf on its branch against the wall. And then with the coming of the night the north wind blew again with greater force, and the rain still beat against the windows.

When it was light enough, Johnsy ordered Sue to open the curtains. The vine leaf was still there. Johnsy lay for a long time looking at it and then said:

"I've been a bad girl, Sue. I wish I hadn't been so wicked. Something has made that last leaf stay there to show me how wicked I was when I wanted to die. You may bring me a little soup now and some milk with a little port wine in it, and — no, bring me a hand-mirror first and pack some pillows about me, I want to sit and watch you cook."

The doctor came in the afternoon and said Johnsy was out of danger. "And now I must see another patient downstairs," he added. "His name's Behrman — some kind of artist, I believe. He's a weak old man and there's obviously no hope for him."

Next day Sue came to the bed where Johnsy lay and put one arm around her.

"I've something to tell you, white mouse," she said. "I got a note this morning. Mr Behrman died of pneumonia in hospital. He was only ill two days, so he didn't suffer long. The janitor found him in the morning of the first day in his room helpless with pain. His shoes and clothes were wet through and icy cold. They couldn't imagine where he had been on such a terrible night. And then they found a lantern still lighted, and a ladder that had been taken from its place, and some brushes lying here and there, and green and yellow paint, and — look out of the window, dear, at the last leaf on the wall. Didn't you wonder why it never moved when the wind blew? Ah, darling, it's Behrman's masterpiece — he painted it there the night the last leaf fell."