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THE COURTING OF LADY JANE

By Josephine Daskam

The colonel entered his sister's room abruptly, sat down on her bed, and scattered a drawerful of fluffy things laid out for packing.

"You don't seem to think about my side of the matter," he said gloomily. "What am I to do here all alone, for Heaven's sake?"

"That is so like a man," she murmured, one arm in a trunk. "Let me see: party-boots, the children's arctics, Dick's sweater—did you think I could live here forever, Cal?"

"Then you shouldn't have come at all. Just as I get thoroughly settled down to flowers in the drawing-room, and rabbits in a chafing-dish, and people for dinner, you skip off. Why don't you bring the children here? What did you marry into the navy for, anyway? Nagasaki! I wouldn't live in a place called Nagasaki for all that money could buy!"

"You're cross," said Mrs. Dick placidly. "Please get off that bath-wrapper. If you don't like to live alone—Six bath-towels, Dick's shoe-bag, my old muff (I hope and pray I'll remember that!) Helen's reefer—Why don't you marry?"

"Marry? Marry! Are you out of your mind, Dosia? I marry!"

The colonel twisted his grayish mustache into points; a look of horror spread over his countenance.

"Men have done it," she replied seriously, "and lived. Look at Dick."

"Look at him? But how? Who ever sees him? I've ceased to believe in him, personally. I can't look across the Pacific. Consider my age, Dosia; consider my pepper-and-salt hair; consider my bronchitis; consider—"

"Consider your stupidity! As to your hair, I should hate to eat a salad dressed with that proportion of pepper. As to your age, remember you're only ten years ahead of me, and I expect to remain thirty-eight for some time."

"But forty-eight is centenarian to a girl of twenty-two, Dosia."

The colonel was plaiting and un-plaiting the ball-fringe of the bed-slip; his eyes followed the motion of his fingers—he did not see his sister's triumphant smile as she dived again into the trunk.

"That depends entirely on the girl. Take Louise Morris, for instance; she regards you as partly entombed, probably"—the colonel winced involuntarily—"but, on the other hand, a girl like Jane Leroy would have no such nonsense in her head, and she can't be much more than twenty."

“She is twenty-two,” cried the unsuspecting colonel eagerly.

“Ah? I should not have said so much. Now such a girl as that, Cal, handsome, dignified, college-bred, is just the wife for an older man. One can't seem to see her marrying some young snip of her own age. She'd be wasted on him. I happen to know that she refused Wilbur Vail entirely on that ground. She admitted that he was a charming fellow, but she told her mother he was far too young for her. And he was twenty-eight.”

“Did she?” The colonel left the fringe. “But—but perhaps there were other reasons; perhaps she didn't—”

“Oh, probably she didn't. But still, she said he was too young. That's the way with these serious girls. Now I thought Dick was middle-aged when I married him, and he was thirty. Jane doesn't take after her mother; she was only nineteen when she was born—I mean, of course, when Jane was born. Will you hand me that crocheted shawl, please?”

“My dear girl, you're not going to try to get that into that trunk, too? Something will break.”

“Not at all, my dear Clarence. Thank you. Will you send Norah up to me as you go down?”

It had not occurred to the colonel that he was going down, but he decided that he must have been, and departed, forgetting Norah utterly before he had accomplished half of the staircase.

He wandered out through the broad hall, reaching down a hat absently, and across the piazza. Then, half unconscious of direction, he crossed the neat suburban road and strolled up the gravel path of the cottage opposite. Mrs. Leroy was sitting in the bay-window, attaching indefinite yards of white lace to indefinite yards of white ruffles. Jane, in cool violet lawn, was reading aloud to her. Both looked up at his light knock at the side door.

“But I am afraid I interrupt,” he suggested politely, as he dropped into a low chair with a manner that betokened the assurance of a warm welcome.

“Not the least in the world,” Mrs. Leroy smiled whimsically.

“Lady is reading Pater to me for the good of my soul, and I am listening politely for the good of her manners,” she answered. “But it is a little wearing for us both, for she knows I don't understand it, and I know she thinks me a little dishonest for pretending to.”

“Mother!”

The girl's gray eyes opened wide above her cool, creamy cheeks; the deep dimples that made her mother's face so girlish actually added a regularity and seriousness to the daughter's soft chin. Her chestnut hair was thick and straight, the little half-curls of the same rich tint that fell over her mother's forehead brushed wavelessly back on each side of a deep widow's peak.

The two older ones laughed.

“Always uncompromising, Lady Jane!” the colonel cried.

“I assure you, colonel, when Lady begins to mark iniquities, few of us stand!”

Jane smiled gravely, as on two children. “You know very well that is nonsense,” she said.

Black Hannah appeared in the door, beaming and curtsying to the colonel.

“You-all ready foh yoh tea, Miss Lady?” she inquired.

A sudden recollection threw Mrs. Leroy into one of her irresistible fits of gentle laughter.

“Oh, Lady,” she murmured, “do you remember that impossible creature that lectured me about Hannah's asking you for orders? Did I tell you about it, colonel?”

Jane shook her head reprovingly.

“Now, mother dearest, you always make him out worse—”

“Worse, my darling? Worse is a word that couldn't be applied to that man. Worse is comparative. Positive he certainly was, superlative is mild, but comparative—never!”

“Tell about it, do,” begged the guest.

“Well, he came to see how Lady was growing up—he's a sort of species of relative—and he sat in your chair, colonel, and talked the most amazing Fourth Reader platitudes in a deep bass voice. And when Hannah asked Lady what her orders were for the grocer, he gave me a terrible look and rumbled out: 'I am grieved to see, Cousin Alice, that Jennie has burst her bounds!'

“It sounded horribly indecorous—I expected to see her in fragments on the floor—and I fairly gasped.”

“Gasped, mother? You laughed in his face!”

“Did I, dearest? It is possible.” Mrs. Leroy admitted. “And when I looked vague he explained, 'I mean that you seem to have relinquished the reins very early, Cousin Alice!'

“'Relinquished? Relinquished?' said I. 'Why, dear me, Mr. Wadham, I never held 'em!'”

“He only meant, mother dear, that—”

“Bless you, my child, I know what he only meant! He explained it to me very fully. He meant that when a widow is left with a ten-year-old child, she should apply to distant cousins to manage her and her funds.”

“Disgusting beast!” the colonel exclaimed with feeling, possessing himself of one of Hannah's beaten biscuits, and smiling as Lady Jane's white fingers dropped just the right number of lumps in his tea.

How charming she was, how dignified, how tender to her merry little mother, this grave, handsome girl! He saw her, in fancy, opposite him at his table, moving so stately about his big empty house, filling it with pretty, useless woman's things, lighting every corner with that last touch of grace that the most faithful housekeeper could never hope to add to his lonely life. For Theodosia had taught him that he was lonely. He envied Dick this sister of his.

He wondered that marriage had never occurred to him before: simply it had not. Ever since that rainy day in April, twenty years ago, when they had buried the slender, soft-eyed little creature with his twisted silver ring on her cold finger, he had shut that door of life; and though it had been many years since the little ring had really bound him to a personality long faded from his mind, he had never thought to open the door—he

had forgotten it was there.

He was not a talkative man, and, like many such, he dearly loved to be amused and entertained by others who were in any degree attractive to him. The picture of these two dear women adding their wit and charm and dainty way of living to his days grew suddenly very vivid to him; he realized that it was an unconscious counting on their continued interest and hospitality that had made the future so comfortable for so long.

With characteristic directness he began:

“Will your Ladyship allow me a half-hour of business with the queen-mother?”

She rose easily and stepped out through the long window to the little side porch, then to the lawn. They watched her as she paced slowly away from them, a tall violet figure vivid against all the green.

“She is a dear girl, isn't she?” said her mother softly.

A sudden flood of delighted pride surged through the colonel's heart. If only he might keep them happy and contented and—and his! He never thought of them apart: no rose and bud on one stem were more essentially together than they.

“She is too dear for one to be satisfied forever with even our charming neighborliness,” he answered gravely. “How long have we lived 'across the street from each other,' as they say here, Mrs. Leroy?”

She did not raise her eyes from her white ruffles.

“It is just a year this month,” she said.

“We are such good friends,” he continued in his gentle, reserved voice, “that I hesitate to break into such pleasant relations, even with the chance of making us all happier, perhaps. But I cannot resist the temptation. Could we not make one family, we three?”

A quick, warm color flooded her cheeks and forehead. She caught her breath; her startled eyes met his with a lightning-swift flash of something that moved him strangely.

“What do you mean, Colonel Driscoll?” she asked, low and quickly.

“I mean, could you give me your daughter—if she—at any time—could think it possible?”

She drew a deep breath; the color seemed blown from her transparent skin like a flame from a lamp. For a moment her head seemed to droop; then she sat straight and moistened her lips, her eyes fixed level ahead.

“Lady?” she whispered, and he was sure that she thought the word was spoken in her ordinary tone. “Lady?”

“I know—I realize perfectly that it is a presumption in me—at my age—when I think of what she deserves. Oh, we won't speak of it again if you feel that it would be wrong!”

“No, no, it is not that,” she murmured. “I—I have always known that I must lose her; but she—one is so selfish—she is all I have, you know!”

“But you would not lose her!” he cried eagerly. “You would only share her with me, dear Mrs. Leroy! Do you think—could she—it is possible?”

“Lady is an unusual girl,” she said evenly, but with something gone out of her warm, gay voice. “She has never cared for young people. I know that she admires you greatly. While I cannot deny that I should prefer less difference than lies between your ages, it would be folly in me to fail to recognize the desirability of the connection in every other way. Whatever her decision—and the matter rests entirely with her—my daughter and I are honored by your proposal, Colonel Driscoll.”

She might have been reading a carefully prepared address: her eyes never wavered from the wall in front—it was as if she saw her words there.

“Then—then will you ask her?”

She stared at him now.

“You mean that you wish me to ask her to marry you?”

“Yes,” he said simply. “She will feel freer in that way. You will know as I should not, directly, if there is any chance. I can talk about it with you more easily—somehow.”

She shrugged her shoulders with a strange air of exhaustion; it was the yielding of one too tired to argue.

“Very well,” she breathed, “go now, and I will ask her. Come this evening. You will excuse—”

She made a vague motion. The colonel pitied her tremendously in a blind way. Was it all this to lose a daughter? How she loved her!

“Perhaps to-morrow morning,” he suggested, but she shook her head vehemently.

“No, to-night, to-night!” she cried. “Lady will know directly. Come tonight!”

He went out a little depressed. Already a tiny cloud hung between them. Suppose their pleasant waters had been troubled for worse than nothing? Suddenly his case appeared hopeless to him. What folly—a man of his years, and that fresh young creature with all her life before her! He wondered that he could have dreamed of it; he wished the evening over and the foolish mistake forgiven.

His sister was full of plans and dates, and her talk covered his almost absolute silence. After dinner she retired again into packing, and he strode through the dusk to the cottage; his had not been a training that seeks to delay the inevitable.

The two women sat, as usual at this hour, on the porch. Their white gowns shimmered against the dark honeysuckle-vine. He halted at the steps and took off the old fatigue-cap he sometimes wore, standing straight and tall before them.

Mrs. Leroy leaned back in her chair; the faintest possible gesture indicated her daughter, who had risen and stood beside her.

“Colonel Driscoll,” she said in a low, uneven voice, “my daughter wishes me to say to you that she appreciates deeply the honor you do her, and that if you wish it she will be your wife. She—she is sure she will be happy.”

The colonel felt his heart leap up and hit heavily against his chest. Was it possible? A great gratitude and pride glowed softly through him. He walked nearly up the steps and stood just below her, lifting her hand to his lips.

"My dear, dear child," he said slowly, "you give me too much, but you must not measure my thankfulness for the gift by my deserts. Whatever a man can do to make you and your mother happy shall be done so long as I live."

She smiled gravely into his eyes and bowed her head slightly; like all her little motions, it had the effect of a graceful ceremony. Then, slipping loose her hand, she seated herself on a low stool beside her mother's chair, leaning against her knee. Her sweet silence charmed him.

He took his accustomed seat, and they sat quietly, while the breeze puffed little gusts of honeysuckle across their faces. Occasional neighbors greeted them, strolling past; the newly watered lawns all along the street sent up a fresh turfy odor; now and then a bird chirped drowsily. He felt deliriously intimate, peacefully at home. A fine, subtle sense of *bien-être* penetrated his whole soul.

When he rose to go they had hardly exchanged a dozen words. As he held, her hand closely, half doubting his right, she raised her face to him simply, and he kissed her white forehead. When he bent over her mother's hand it was as cold as stone.

Through the long pleasant weeks of the summer they talked and laughed and drove and sailed together, a happy trio. Mrs. Leroy's listless quiet of the first few days gave way to a brilliant, fitful gayety that enchanted the more silent two, and the few hours when she was not with them seemed incomplete. On his mentioning this to her one afternoon she shot him a strange glance.

"But this is all wrong," she said abruptly. "What will you do when I am gone in the winter?"

"What do you mean?" he asked. "Gone where, when, how?"

"My dear colonel," she said lightly, but with an obvious effort, "do you imagine that I cannot leave you a honeymoon, in spite of my doting parenthood? I plan to spend the latter part of the winter in New York with friends. Perhaps by spring—"

"My dear Mrs. Leroy, how absurd! How cruel of you! What will Lady do? What shall I do? She has never been separated from you in her life. Does she know of this?"

"No; I shall tell her soon. As for what she will do—she will have her husband. If that is not enough for her, she should not marry the man who cannot—"

She stopped suddenly and controlled with great effort a rising emotion almost too strong for her. Again a deep, inexplicable sympathy welled up in him. He longed to comfort her, to give her everything she wanted. He blamed himself and Jane for all the trouble they were causing her.

That afternoon she kept in her room, and he and his fiancée drank their tea together alone. He was worried by the news of the morning, dissatisfied out of all proportion, vexed that so sensible and natural a proposition should leave him so uneasy and disappointed. He had meant the smooth, quiet life to go on without a break, and now the new relation must change everything.

He glanced at Jane, a little irritated that she should not perceive his mood and exorcise it. But she had not her mother's marvellous susceptibility. She drank her tea in serene silence. He made a few haphazard remarks, hoping to lose in conversation the cloud that threatened his evening; but she only assented tranquilly and watched the changing colors of the early sunset.

"Have you made a vow to agree with everything I say?" he asked finally, half laughing, half in earnest.

"Not at all," she replied placidly, "but you surely do not want an argument?"

"Oh, no," he answered her, vexed at himself.

"What do you think of Mrs. ———'s novel?" he suggested, as the pages, fluttering in the rising breeze, caught his attention.

"Mother is reading it, not I," she returned indifferently. "I don't care very much for the new novels."

Involuntarily he turned as if to catch her mother's criticism of the book: light, perhaps, but witty, and with a little tang of harmless satire that always took his fancy. But she was not there. He sighed impatiently; was it possible he was a little bored?

A quick step sounded on the gravel walk, a swish of skirts.

"It is Louise Morris," she said, "I'll meet her at the gate."

After a short conference she returned.

"Will you excuse me, please?" she said, quite eagerly for her. "Mother will be down soon, anyway, I am sure. Louise's brother is back; he has been away in the West for six years. Mother will be delighted—she was always so fond of Jack. Louise is making a little surprise for him. He must be quite grown up now. I'll go and tell mother."

A moment later and she was gone. Mrs. Leroy took her place in the window, and imperceptibly under her gentle influence the cloud faded from his horizon; he forgot the doubt of an hour ago. At her suggestion he dined there, and found himself, as always when with his hostess, at his best. He felt that there was no hypocrisy in her interest in his ideas, and the ease with which he expressed them astonished him even while he delighted in it. Why could he not talk so with Jane? It occurred to him suddenly that it was because Jane herself talked rarely. She was, like him, a listener, for the most part. His mind, unusually alert and sensitive to-night, looked ahead to the happy winter evenings he had grown to count on so, and when, with an effort, he detached this third figure from the group to be so closely allied after Christmas-tide—the date fixed for the wedding—he perceived that there was a great gap in the picture, that the warmth and sparkle had suddenly gone. All the tenderness in the world could not disguise that flash of foresight.

He grew quiet, lost in revery. She, following his mood, spoke less and less; and when Jane returned, late at night, escorted by a tall, bronzed young ranchman, she found them sitting in silence in a half-light, staring into the late September fire on the hearth.

In the month that followed an imperceptible change crept over the three. The older woman was much alone—variable as an April day, now merry and caressing, now sombre and withdrawn. The girl clung to her mother more closely, sat for long minutes holding her hand, threw strange glances at her betrothed that would have startled him, so different were they from her old, steady regard, had not his now troubled sense of some impalpable mist that wrapped them all grown stronger every day. He avoided sitting alone with her, wondering sometimes at the ease with which such tête-à-têtes were dispensed with. Then, struck with apprehension at his seeming neglect, he spent his ingenuity in delicate attentions toward her, courtly thoughtfulness of her tastes, beautiful gifts that provoked from her, in turn, all the little intimacies and tender friendliness of their earlier intercourse.

At one of these tiny crises of mutual restoration, she, sitting alone with him in the drawing-room, suddenly raised her eyes and looked steadily at him.

“You care for me, then, very much?” she said earnestly. “You—you would miss—if things were different? You really count on—on—our marriage? Are you happy?”

A great remorse rose in him. Poor child—poor, young, unknowing creature, that, after all, was only twenty-two! She felt it, then, the strange mist that seemed to muffle his words and actions, to hold him back. And she had given him so much!

He took her hands and drew her to him.

“My dear, dear child,” he said gently, “forgive a selfish middle-aged bachelor if he cannot come up to the precious ideals of the sweetest girlhood in the world! I am no more worthy of you, Lady dear, than I have ever been, but I have never felt more tender toward you, more sensible of all you are giving me. I cannot pretend to the wild love of the poets you read so much; that time, if it ever was, is past for me. I am a plain, unromantic person, who takes and leaves a great deal for granted—I thought you knew that. But you must never doubt—” He paused a moment, and for the first time she interrupted him nervously.

“I never will—Clarence,” she said almost solemnly; and it struck him for the first time that she had never called him by his name before. He leaned over her, and as in one of her rare concessions she lifted her face up to him, he bent lower than her forehead; what compelled him to kiss her soft cheek rather than her lips he did not know.

Unexpected business summoned him to New York for a fortnight the next day, and the great city drew him irresistibly into its noisy maelstrom. The current of his thoughts changed absolutely. Old friends and new took up his leisure. His affairs, as they grew more pressing, woke in him a keen delight in the struggle with his opponents; as he shook hands triumphantly with his lawyer after a well-earned victory he felt years younger. He decided that he had moped too long in the country: “We must move into town this season,” he said to himself.

He fairly ran up the cottage steps in the gathering dusk. He longed to see them, full of plans for the winter. Hannah met him at the door: the ladies had gone to a dance at the Morrises'; there had been an invitation for him, so he would not intrude if he followed.

Hastily changing his clothes, he walked up the street. Lights and music poured out of the open windows of the large house; the full moon made the grounds about it almost as bright as the rooms. He stepped up on the piazza and looked in at the swaying couples. Lady Jane, beautiful in pale blue mull, drifted by in her young host's arms. She was flushed with dancing; her hair had escaped from its usual calm. He hardly recognized her. As he looked out toward the old garden, he caught a glimpse of a flowing white gown, a lace scarf thrown over a head whose fine poise he could not mistake.

A young man passed him with a filmy crêpe shawl he knew well. The colonel stepped along with him.

“You are taking this to Mrs. Leroy?”

“Yes, colonel, she feels the air a little.”

“Let me relieve you of it,” and he walked alone into the garden with the softly scented cobweb over his arm.

She was standing in an old neglected summer-house, her back to the door. As he stopped behind her and laid the soft wrap over her firm white shoulders, she turned her head with a startled prescience of his personality, and met his eyes full. He looked straight into those soft gray depths, and as he looked, searching for something there, he knew not what, troubled strangely by her nearness and the helpless surrender of her fastened gaze, a great light burst upon him.

“It is you! it is you!” he said hoarsely, and crushing her in his arms, he kissed her heavily on her yielding mouth.

For a moment she rested against him. The music, piercingly sweet, drove away thought. Then she drew herself back, pushing him blindly from her.

“No, no, no!” she gasped, “it is Lady! You are mad—”

“Mad?” he said quickly. “I was never sane till now. When I think of what I had to offer that dear child, when I realize to what a farce of love I was sacrificing her—oh, Alice dearest, you are a woman; you must have known!”

She raised her head; an unquenchable triumph smiled at him.

“I did know!” she cried exultantly. Suddenly her whole expression changed, her head sank again.

“Oh, Lady, my child, my baby!” she moaned, all mother now, and brokenhearted.

“You must never tell her, never!” she panted. “You will forget; you—I will go away—”

“It is you who are mad, Alice,” he said sternly. “Listen to me. For all these weeks it has been your voice I have remembered, your face I have seen in imagination in my house. It is you I have missed from us three—never Lady. It is you I have tried to please and hoped to satisfy—not Lady. Ever since you told me you would not spend the winter with us I have been discontented. Why, Alice, I have never kissed her in my life—as I have kissed you.”

She grew red to the tips of her little ears, and threw him a quick glance that tingled to his fingers' ends.

“You would not have me—oh, my dear, it is not possible!” he cried.

She burst into tears. “I don't know—I don't know!” she sobbed. “It will break her heart! I don't understand her any more; once I could tell what she would think, but not now.”

“Hush! some one is coming,” he warned her, and taking her arm he drew her out through a great gap in the side of the little house, so that they stood hidden by it.

“Then I will tell him to his face what I think of him!” said a young man's voice, angry, determined, but shaking with disappointment. “To hold a girl—”

“He does not hold me—I hold myself!” It was Lady's voice, low and trembling. “It is all my fault, Jack. I bound myself before I knew what—what a different thing it really was. I do love him—I love him dearly, but not—not—No, no; I don't mean what you think—or, if I do, I must not. Jack, I have promised, don't you see? And when I thought that perhaps he didn't care so much, and asked him—oh, I told you how beautifully he answered me, I will never hurt him so, never!”

“It is disgusting, it is horrible; he is twenty-five years older than you—he might be your father!” stormed the voice.

“I—I never cared for young people before!”

Could this be Lady, this shy, faltering girl? Moved by an overmastering impulse, the man behind the summer-house turned his head and looked through the broken wall.

Lady Jane was blushing and paling in quick succession: the waves of red flooded over her moved face and receded like the tide at turn. Her eyes were piteous; her hair fell low over her forehead; she looked incredibly young.

“Of course,” said the young man bitterly, “it is a good match—a fine match, You will have a beautiful home and everything you want.”

She put out her hands appealingly. “Oh, Jack, how can you hurt me so? You know I would live with you in a garret—on the plains—”

“Then do it.”

“I shall never hurt a person so terribly to whom I have freely given my word,” she said, with a touch of her old-time decision.

Colonel Driscoll felt his blood sweeping through his veins like wine. He was far too excited for finesse, too eager—and he had been so willing to wait, once!—for the next sweet moment when this almost tragedy should be resolved into its elements. He strode out into the open space in front of the little house.

“My dear young people,” he said, as they stared at him in absolute silence, “I am, I am—” He had intended to carry the matter off jocularly, but the sight of the girl's tear-stained face and the emotion of the minutes before had softened and awed him. His eyes seemed yet to hold those gray ones; he felt strangely the pressure of that soft body against his.

“Ah, my dear,” he said gently, “could you not believe me when I told you that my one wish was to make you happy as long as I lived? Happiness is not built on mistakes, and you must forgive us if we do not always allow youth to monopolize them.

“She has always been like a dear child to me, Mr. Morris”—he turned to the other man—“and you would never wish me to change my regard for her, could you know it!

“Go with him, Lady dear, and forgive me if I have ever pained you—believe me, I am very happy to-night.”

He raised her softly as she knelt before him weeping, and kissed her hair.

“But there is nothing to forgive,” he assured her.

They went away hand in hand, happy, like two dazed children for whom the sky has suddenly but not—because they are young—too miraculously opened, and the shrubbery swallowed them.

He turned and strode back into the shadow. Mrs. Leroy sat crouching on the fallen timber, her head still bent. Stooping behind her, he drew her toward him.

“They have forgotten us by now,” he whispered, “can I make you forget them?”

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