

Olivia's Dilemma

"History does not repeat itself, but it does rhyme."
-Mark Twain

I was excited and eager to tell my older brother Lewis and my younger sister Olivia about being cast in the starring role of the first new play of 1862, at the Haymarket Theatre, called *Love Dies at Night*, but Olivia and her young sons had traveled over two hundred miles to Walthamstow from Cornwall, and brought Lewis with them, so I presumed she was having a crisis. I decided not to announce my achievement just yet.

I moved to the Walthamstow area from my brother Lewis' home in Chelsea, just six months before. The house was built only a few years before I leased it. A brick abode with a bay window and a gabled roof, as was the fashion of newly built homes surrounding London.

I had a small front porch and the four of them were crowded closely together, breaths steaming in the January cold while waiting for me to answer their knock. I opened the door, stepped to the side, and let Lewis, Olivia and her two young sons into my home.

I greeted them with hugs and kisses and sat the boys down at a small tavern table that I bought in a junk shop a few years ago. I served them apple cakes and tea. While the boys were eating their treats and creating funny names to call each other, I asked Olivia the reason for their unannounced visit.

"Got any brandy?" Lewis said, abruptly.

"Indeed, I do. Your favorite, no less."

“Pour me a snort,” Lewis said. “And you might want to pour yourself one too. Brace yourself for what Olivia is going to tell you.”

After we finished our brandy, I asked Lewis to watch over the boys and I walked Olivia back to my pantry room, for a private conversation.

I lit the oil lamp that I kept on top of a shelf and in the dull light I said, “Please, tell me.”

“I’m pregnant. Again.”

Olivia massaged her fingertips over the sides of her forehead.

“And I have a terrible headache.”

“Being pregnant is your problem?”

“Yes, Cordelia. Another child to care for. Another mouth to feed.”

I thought about my own problems. I was considered scandalous by London society; an actress living alone with no male protector in the house, no husband, no suitors, or prospects. The marquess who proclaimed his love for me every time I allowed him to secretly visit my bedroom, was in a class high above me and would never think of leaving his wife to wed an actress. I was six years past the legal marrying age and felt doomed to live and die alone, and never have children. My stage career was still going strong, albeit waning a bit with every passing year. I hoped this new play, translated from a play first presented in Paris, would be a consistent source of income for a while. I usually bank away some of my earnings as a buffer for the inevitable. The future time when the marquess tires of me.

“I would suspect that having another baby would not be a significant problem,” I said.

“The opposite of a problem. A blessing.”

“Jameson doesn’t want another child. Last year’s beef slaughter didn’t pay off as well as usual. And milk prices are not what they should be. Rinderpest has been reported in Dorset and Somerset and if it gets to us, we’ll have to kill any cow showing infection.”

Olivia moved her fingers to the middle of her forehead, trying to massage away the tension.

“Please, I was hoping you could help me.”

No solution came to mind, so I said, “I have the answer.”

“Yes?”

Olivia looked at me earnestly, waiting for a resolution to her dilemma. I tried smiling at her in an encouraging way.

“Have the baby.”

Olivia yanked down the high collar of her dress. The skin right above her collarbone and across her shoulder was covered in dark bruises.

“I told you he doesn’t want another baby and if I come back home and I’m still pregnant, I’ll receive more of this.”

She lifted her skirts and pulled down one stocking. All along the side of her calf, were lash marks which most likely came from a whip.

I was horrified. I had no idea.

Olivia showed me a place on her other leg that was bruised. The marks left on Olivia’s body were of different ages. Some were the color of red wine, others were pale, grayish-green, almost healed.

“Our brother knows about this?”

“Lewis knows Jameson doesn’t want the child. He knows nothing of the beatings,” she said.

“We should tell him.”

“No,” Olivia said. “Lewis would hurt him if he saw this. Jameson drinks himself into an angry mood and that is when he becomes violent. It has happened more often since we began having financial problems. If he would just not drink so much.”

“That is not a valid excuse. I think we should tell Lewis.”

“You know how protective Lewis is. He could hurt Jameson, or even kill him.”

“Maybe he should be hurt or...killed,” I said.

I was angry. How dare this awful man harm my sister.

“And Lewis would be a murderer, condemned to Newgate gallows,” Olivia said.

I noticed she did not protest the idea of killing her vile husband, she worried only about what would happen to our brother.

I never approved of Jameson, but it was not my business to approve or disapprove. He sweetly courted Olivia and rushed her away from London after Mother’s death. She was only seventeen but Lewis was also young and struggling with the task of providing shelter and sustenance for me and Olivia. Our father died many years earlier, leaving Lewis to bear most of the family responsibilities. Then Mother died and Lewis was left with an even heavier burden. Jameson falsely presented himself to Lewis as a worthy, honorable, even-tempered young man, willing to care for Olivia on his cattle farm in Cornwall.

Lewis gave his consent. I had suspicions long ago. Through the years, I have conveyed to Lewis that Jameson continually issued harsh orders to Olivia, treating her no better than one of his hounds. He also made nasty remarks concerning my lack of a husband. Whenever I objected

to his comments, Jameson always claimed he was merely jesting and making light-hearted banter. He is a rough and hurtful man.

And now that I knew he was harming my sister, my anger and distaste turned into hatred. Did I genuinely want to risk my own well-being to carry out Jameson's shameful command? What about Olivia? Did he think of the peril she would face? Possibly die? And the guilt she would suffer from knowing she caused the end of her baby's life? How dangerous this scheme was.

"Can Jameson sell part of his land and pay down his debts?"

"Even a sale of half the land would hardly reduce the amount we owe."

I took Olivia's hands and said, "Do you understand what you're asking me?"

Olivia nodded.

I read about the new law in *The Ladies Newspaper and Court Chronicle*, just passed a year earlier, making it a felony to have a forced miscarriage. Before the passing of the 'Offences Against the Person Act' it was common law that forced miscarriages were punished with a misdemeanor charge when done before the first detected movement of the baby, called the quickening. Now, no matter how far along the pregnancy, if a forced miscarriage happened, the sentence was prison or a one way trip to a life of servitude in Australia.

"I could go to prison," I said. "And so could you."

"Jameson will beat me again."

"You could die from the procedure."

"I could die under Jameson's hand."

"Leave him," I said. "Stay here with me. There is an open position at the theatre for a skilled seamstress. I can get you hired if you want."

“That will never happen,” Olivia said. “What scandal that would cause.”

“Scandal be damned. You’ll be away from Cornwall and the gossiping fishermen’s wives and cow herders,” I said.

“And gossiped about here in Walthamstow, for being a pregnant woman without a husband.”

“You’ll have a husband but one too far away to hurt you,” I said.

She stopped massaging her forehead and clasped her hands together, in front of her. I knew this posture. Stubborn, resolved.

“Jameson would never agree to that.”

At that moment, I decided, reluctantly, to help her. At length, she was my sister and she was in distress.

“There is Emily, my house cleaner,” I said. “She might be able to guide us to someone.”

The next morning, Lewis took the boys to his home, to stay with him and his wife Mary. Olivia and I took a Hansom cab to Emily McCollough’s home on Lower Sloane Street. Emily lived in a bakery. She had a room behind the ovens and paid her rent by keeping the bakery clean and the floor free of rats. In exchange she had a warm place to sleep and use of the kitchen, but only on the rare occasions when the ovens were not in use by her landlord.

Emily also did other jobs on the side. Cleaning my rooms on a weekly basis, and cleaning funeral parlors. I suspected she also performed special favors for her landlord-baker, who, according to Emily, was married to a dour, humorless invalid. Bright, cheery Emily would be a logical distraction.

Emily was surprised to see us. I did not preface my inquiry with pleasantries. I told Emily why we were there, what we were seeking straight out, and she showed no sign of disapproval or uneasiness.

“There’s a doctor at the Gipsy Hill Gin Palace, Ma’am” Emily said. “He’s a heavy drinker but he’s a doctor. At least he claims to be a doctor.”

“The Gipsy Hill Gin Palace? He works from there?”

“A rented back room. Past Southwark. You’ve seen the big gray stone building with the black door?”

“Degenerates are known to frequent that place,” I said.

“Degenerates are known to frequent every Gin Palace, Ma’am” Emily replied.

“How do you know him?” I said.

“He helped me once.” She looked away, embarrassed. “When I had the same kind of problem.”

I knew Emily would be of assistance, but I was hoping she would direct us to a discreet nurse or a kind midwife who would hand Olivia a potion or powder to consume. Not an alcoholic Doctor living inside a gin joint.

“You know of no other way?” I said.

“I do not. He is safe though. He had shaky hands but he seemed to know what he was doing,” Emily added.

“Shaky hands? From drinking?” Olivia said.

“I didn’t contract childbed fever,” she whispered. “And I recovered.”

I looked at Emily with sympathetic eyes. I do not judge. She, like many women, could not afford to be burdened with a child. Not then. Not now. Not when she was finally pulling

herself out of poverty. And now Olivia faces a similar problem, although poverty was a secondary reason, the real reason was because of a dangerous, demanding husband.

“Let’s go there,” Olivia said with weariness in her voice.

Emily grabbed her coat and hat and a reticule purse made with a woven pattern of birds and stars. We walked out into the street. I raised my hand to a Growler cab that was passing. The cab stopped and we stepped up to it.

“Where we headed?” said the driver.

“Gipsy Hill Gin Palace.”

He looked from Emily, a dark haired beauty in her own right, to Olivia with her porcelain doll complexion, and to me, blue eyes, dyed black hair set in an elaborate updo and skin kept artificially white from regular applications of lemon juice and vinegar.

“Well, you’ll be served the best at Gipsy Hill Gin Palace,” the driver said. “No place for young ladies though.”

“We’ll be fine,” Emily answered.

“That far out will be four shillings.”

I handed him the money. He waited as we got situated and shut the door. The driver clicked his tongue, snapped the horse’s reins, and started our journey.

We drove through the main streets of London. I noticed that Olivia shied away from the carriage windows, not wanting to see, or be seen. Midway through the trip, her eyes filled with tears. The reality of what was about to happen struck her in the heart and she cried silently as Emily and I murmured comforting words.

She brought out a handkerchief and wiped her eyes.

“I’m going to kill my baby,” she whispered. “I am going to burn in hell.”

“No, Jameson will be the one to face the fiery pit, when the time comes. He is the one forcing this on you. God knows who to blame,” I said.

“I’ll just have to accept my fate,” Olivia said.

She was telling this to herself more than to Emily and me.

The carriage pulled up to Gipsy Hill Gin Palace. The massive building was brilliantly lit up, overpowering the hazy morning sunlight.

“If I bring another child into this world, I don’t know what Jameson would do to me.”

She placed her handkerchief back into her dress pocket.

“But women die from forced miscarriages, I realize all too well,” Olivia said. She closed her eyes and leaned her head against the back of her seat. “If I die, it might not be such a terrible thing.”

“Please do not speak of your death,” I said, and grabbed her hand. “I will not allow you to die.”

“You won’t die, Ma’am,” Emily added. “I didn’t.”

Olivia opened her eyes and smiled. A joyless close mouthed smile.

“Then I’ll have some time on this earth with my sons, before I burn everlasting,” she said.

We left the carriage and was allowed inside by a large man wearing a black Bowler propped sideways on his huge bald head.

An expensive looking chandelier, dripping in crystals commanded the center of the room. Cut glass windows sparkled like they were lit with fallen stars. Ornate mirrors and mosaics and carved wood panels complimented the walls. The wooden bar top was polished to a soft glimmer sullied only by a few wet rings where drinking glasses had been a moment before.

Young women dressed in form fitting brightly colored dresses were stationed behind the long bar. The women filled orders and poured Gin from spigots in barrels labeled in chalk with such names as The True Kick and Valley Nectar and The No Regrets.

A portly man staggered by us, turned, tipped his hat, and fell at our feet. Emily stepped over him and took us through the mass of people. Even in the mid-morning, the palace was full. Patrons from all walks of life, all social classes except for the lofty uppers, washed around us like choppy waves of the sea. Emily looked toward the back of the huge room and saw what she was looking for. She directed us toward a small door situated on the rear wall of the room. Emily tapped a quick succession of four raps, a pause and one more rap. The door opened slightly. There was only darkness, then a booming male voice said, “What do you want?”

“We’re looking for Doctor Pete. It’s urgent,” Emily said.

The door opened wider and a man as broad and tall as the one guarding the front entrance of the Gin Palace, stood there.

“Yes?”

“Lady Godiva sent us.”

The man grabbed Emily’s arm and pulled her into the blackness. I followed and took Olivia’s hand. The man quickly closed the door and locked it, behind us.

“Wait here.”

We waited, in the deep dark, wondering what would come next.

“Don’t worry,” Emily said. “This is how it was done for me.”

The large man came back with a lamp and said, “Follow.”

We were led to another door and when our large guide opened it, a young lady, no more than twelve or thirteen years old, ran out of the room and into the darkened hall, followed by an

elderly woman who called after her. The elderly woman stopped for a moment and said, “Thank you Doctor,” then trotted on after the girl.

The large man announced in a sarcastic voice, “Lady Godiva sent them.”

Cautiously, we entered the room to find an older, gray haired man removing a sheet blemished by a bright spot of blood, off a wooden slab.

“Doctor Pete,” Emily said. “You probably don’t remember me. I was here a couple of years ago.”

The man turned to Emily and said, “You are correct, I don’t remember you.”

He wadded the sheet up into a ball and handed it to the large man in the Bowler, then went to a cabinet, pulled out another sheet, unfolded it and placed it over the table.

“Back again? Same problem?”

He finished tucking the corners of the sheet under the slab of stain-splattered hard wood while the large man left the room and closed the door behind him.

“We’re not here for me,” Emily answered.

“How much to end a pregnancy?” I said, wanting to get on with it.

“How much?” He went to a chair and plopped down. “How much are you willing to pay?”

“Two pounds,” Olivia said in a whisper. “Is that sufficient?”

She handed me the money.

“Acceptable,” Doctor Pete said to Olivia. “This... procedure is for you?”

“Yes,” she answered and stepped forward, face red from crying.

“Take off your underclothing and get on the table,” Doctor Pete said.

Olivia turned to Emily, “You are sure it will be alright?” It will be done safely?”

“As safe as possible,” Doctor Pete answered before Emily could.

Olivia reluctantly pulled off her pantaloons, and carefully climbed onto the table.

“Be thankful that you found me. Others would tell you to drink disgusting potions filled with poisons that could very well kill you along with the fetus. Or poke you the wrong way with dirty tools and poison your blood. I won’t do either.”

Doctor Pete went to the cabinet, pulled out a dark bottle of gin, popped off the cork and took a long deep drink. He splashed gin over one hand, then the other, and rubbed his palms together over a washing bowl. I wondered what kind of ceremony this was. A tribute to the Gods of intoxication?

He must have seen my confused look because he said, “A colleague of mine, a Doctor in Vienna taught me this. We were in correspondence. Back before they decided to silence me. Back before I lost my license. Semmelweis. A brilliant man. He uses chlorinated lime solution. I used up my supply so gin will have to do for today. Kills the invisible organisms. So I don’t infect your friend here.”

Doctor Pete splashed his wrists and forearms, took another drink from the bottle, and said, “Not like those barbarians who come straight from the morgue then put their hands up a woman to pull out a child and infect them with the bloody filth they carried in from the cadaver they just examined.”

Doctor Pete reached back into the cabinet and brought out a rolled leather stock of medical tools and a towel.

“And they had the audacity to call me unethical.”

He unfurled the stock and picked out a long thin needlelike instrument with a small metal loop at the end, which he told us, was a curette, and another metal device that resembled a wide

handled set of tongs. He laid the two items in a long wooden bowl and poured the remaining contents from the gin bottle over them until both instruments were covered in a shallow pool. He took the towel and from a pitcher, poured water over the towel, grabbed a small bar of soap off the top of the cabinet, and handed them both to her.

“Wash yourself down there,” he commanded.

Reluctantly, Olivia washed herself.

“I’ll let these soak for a moment,” he said.

I looked around the shadowy room while Olivia focused her tearful gaze on the instruments Doctor Pete had left soaking in the gin.

In the flickering light, the face of a rat peeked out from a hole in the baseboard, silently observing, twitching his whiskers. His black beady eyes seemed to be looking directly at Doctor Pete. Emily clapped her hands and the rat darted back into his hole.

Doctor Pete rubbed his chin whiskers and I wondered what strange invisible organisms might live among his stubbles.

“Nothing to worry about ladies. I’ve done this procedure dozens of times and not one woman has died. Except... well, that Italian girl, but that was not my fault.”

He looked at Olivia and smiled, showing a mouthful of uneven stained teeth. I presumed he was trying to be reassuring, but his yellow toothed grin didn’t help.

“Keep still, no matter the pain. If you move it could be perilous and I could strike something vital, potentially fatal.”

He held out his trembling hand and said, “I’ll need that money now.”

I handed a single pound note to Emily who passed it to the Doctor.

“Two,” Doctor Pete said.

“Half now,” I said. “And the other half when the deed is done.”

He made a pish sound with his mouth and gave me an annoyed look.

“I will return shortly,” he said and hurriedly left the room.

Olivia let out a surprised cry. “Where is he off to?”

“I don’t know,” Emily answered, alarmed.

“He will return?” Olivia said.

“I believe he will,” Emily answered unconvincingly.

“He hasn’t been fully paid yet,” I said. “So I’ll wager that he’ll return.”

Time passed slowly as we waited. It seemed close to half an hour’s time before Doctor Pete opened the door again and entered holding a full bottle of gin.

“Required more of this,” he said. “Encountered an old acquaintance. He felt compelled to recount his many ailments to me. I apologize.”

He took a long drink from his bottle, corked it, and placed it inside the cabinet then slid a dark lamp out from the corner of the cabinet and lit it. He turned down the wick and said, “Which of you will hold the lamp for me?”

I stepped closer and said, “I will.”

Doctor Pete dipped his hands in the bowl of gin, rubbed his fingers together, and ordered Olivia to lay back and stay perfectly motionless.

I held the lamp as he instructed. I noticed his hands were no longer shaking. They were steady and still. The infusion of more gin, I presumed must’ve cured his trembles.

Doctor Pete lifted Olivia’s skirts and told her to hold them up.

He pressed on her abdomen, feeling with his fingers, and pushed down on her pelvis.

“Open your legs,” Doctor Pete ordered. Olivia did so and he took hold of one of her legs and moved it into a bent knee position then he moved the other leg into the same position and pressed both legs out wider. He noticed the welts on her calf.

“What do we have here?” he said and looked Olivia in the face.

“Please, it’s nothing,” Olivia answered.

He lightly tapped his finger on the welts and Olivia flinched.

Doctor Pete said in a low voice, “I see you wear a wedding ring. Tell your husband you’re not a horse to be whipped.”

Olivia looked at him, surprised by his words.

“If you want, for five more pounds, I can give you a tonic. Tasteless. Guaranteed to cure your husband from ever whipping you again.”

“No, no, it’s nothing like that.”

It was exactly like that; I said to myself.

Just, may we proceed and conclude this procedure swiftly?” Olivia’s voice was turning shrill. Apparently, she didn’t want to talk about her injuries with Doctor Pete and she certainly didn’t show any interest in purchasing a “tonic” for Jameson.

“Yes we may,” Doctor Pete replied. “Shift yourself to the edge of the table.”

He picked up one of the instruments and said, “This is a speculum. This holds your vagina open so I can insert the curette. I am going to put it in now. Stay just like that and don’t move.”

Olivia did what she was told and Doctor Pete inserted the device.

“Hold the lantern closer,” he said to me.

I got as close as I could without burning either of them.

He raised the curette from its gin bath. The fingers of his left hand disappeared inside Olivia, and with his right hand he slowly inserted the curette, guiding it along its path.

He moved the curette in a scraping motion. Olivia looked like she was going to scream but she held it in.

“How do you fare?” Doctor Pete said to Olivia.

“Well enough,” she whispered.

He slowly slid the curette out and dropped it back into the bowl of gin. Dots of blood from the end of the curette, sunk to the bottom. He took out the speculum and placed it in the bowl.

“There will be bleeding. More than with your monthlies,” he told Olivia. “Keep yourself clean, wash every morning, and at midday, and every night. Make sure the water you use is boiled first and change the padding frequently before it gets too soaked. Don’t let the old blood accumulate too much, it could attract infection.”

Doctor Pete motioned for Olivia to get off the table.

“I estimated you to be barely three months. Am I correct?”

“Yes, I believe so,” Olivia said with uncertainty.

“So there will be some tissue matter.”

He pulled the sheet spotted with blood off the table.

“How long will I bleed?”

“More than a week. Ten days, maybe twelve. Could be some cramping too.”

Doctor Pete brought out a T-bandage and a bag of padding and handed it to Olivia.

“Put this on,” he said.

Olivia turned her back to us, placed the padding inside the T-bandage and tied the straps around her waist. She put her pantaloons back on, dropped her skirts, turned around, and said, “What else do I need to do?”

“No intimate relations,” he said. “Not until you stop bleeding.”

“Anything else?” I said.

“Yes. I need to be paid the other pound note that was promised.”

I quickly handed the second note over to him.

Doctor Pete herded us toward the door and said, “Not a word to anyone, understood?”

Emily said, “We won’t tell a soul about this, will we ladies?”

Olivia said, “Of course not.”

“We will never speak of this again,” I said.

He seemed satisfied with our answers.

“You can show yourselves out,” Doctor Pete said.

“Thank you, Doctor,” Emily said.

I opened the door and Doctor Pete closed it behind us. We touched our palms against the walls to navigate our way through the darkness until the doorman met us with the lamp and led us to the second exit.

The doorman unbolted the second door for us and after our eyes adjusted to the sudden bright lights, Emily and I guided Olivia between the drunken patrons, toward the front.

Outside, as we stood waiting for a cab in the noon day mist, I asked Olivia if she were unwell. Her face was pale and her eyes were red rimmed from crying. I wanted to hug her and tell her how sorry I was that she had to go through this, but her stance told me she did not want to be hugged. She wanted to distance herself from the world and wrap herself in silence. It was

how she handled the sudden death of our father, so many years ago. Quieting herself, listening only to her own thoughts. It was the way she coped during the prolonged journey to heaven that our mother suffered through. I imagined it was the way she endured Jameson's assaults.

She whispered, "Yes, I'm fine."

I observed that she was standing tilted, slightly forward, as if she were being battered by a strong headwind. Then she looked at Emily and said, "Please, will you give my thanks to Lady Godiva? The one who you said had sent us?"

"There is no Lady Godiva, at least not in this century," Emily said. "It is just a secret name said to let them know why we were there."

"Oh," Olivia replied. "Of course."

Emily gave her a quick smile; sympathetic, bittersweet.

"And Cordelia?" Olivia said, turning to me. "Upon reflection, I believe I shall accept your offer to accommodate myself and the boys. I don't think I should spend my recovery time in Cornwall, with Jameson."

"It is the right course of action," I said quickly.

"I don't think I really want to reside with Jameson, ever again."

"You are welcome to stay as long as you desire."

"He'll accuse me of not being interested in keeping up his household and he will try to take the boys from me. He will say that I'm hysterical and deranged. That I should be taken to an insane asylum."

"And you will threaten to tell the Cornwall constabulary that he made you endure a forced miscarriage."

"They will still punish me, instead."

“We will tell Lewis about the beatings and he and I will protect you. If you must, you will show the police your many bruises and abrasions, caused by Jameson.”

“Yes, that is exactly what I shall do,” Olivia answered and went back to standing very still, very calm against the conjectural storm, steadfast and resolute, hands folded together, as we waited for a cab.