

Lou Lispenard's Escape

by Caroline Conrad

Ren Clifford sat with head drooped and an expression of perplexed thought upon his countenance, not that he doubted *her*, but there were so many things about it all that he could not understand. There was such a tangle somehow, and daylight nowhere, that he could discover. He had grown thin with fasting, for he could not eat, and haggard with anxiety, for he loved with all the energies of his soul the pretty girlish girl whom all the world was condemning now, and whose slender loveliness damp prison walls were enclosing in what certainly threatened to be a relentless embrace. If Lou would only be reasonable herself, but there was just the trouble; the girl was icy as an Artic berg and impenetrable as granite.

Ren Clifford had been all over the ground that was his to go over, too thoroughly to misunderstand the position. Unless something new turned up, Lou was lost most likely. His face blanched of the little fleshy hue it had, and he clenched his hand impotently.

“If she would only let me help her,” he groaned.

The girl he loved—the girl who was to have been his wife in a few weeks—Death! It was too horrible.

Someone rapped lightly upon his door, and then the bolt shot back, and Cresswell, the lawyer friend he had sent for, came in.

“Thank God you have come!” the young man exclaimed, springing to meet him. “I should have gone for you myself, but I couldn’t go far away from her. Old friend, save her!” He broke down with a piteous cry, covering his face with his hands.

Only a moment. Lawyer Cresswell had not time to grow impatient, scarcely to feel pitiful. Ren Clifford had held haggard, haunted vigils of late, his nerves were jarred with sleeplessness and unstrung with horror; and the sight of his friend had touched him. But he rallied at once, dropped the momentary weakness with his hands from his face, and sat up straight and calm, eager and keen.

“Now, Cresswell.”

The lawyer took a chair near him and fixed his eye upon a projection of the cornice, folding his arms and waiting.

“You had better begin at the beginning,” he remarked, suggestively, after a little, seeing that Clifford hesitated. “Never mind the murder till you come to it; tell me all about your engagement—how long you had known Miss Lispenard, where, how—“

“I can’t see what that has to do with it,” said Ren, opening his eyes and coloring a little under the lawyer’s glance.

“Tush, Ren! did you send for me to conduct this affair, or did you not?”

“Of course; Lou would have no one if it had been left to her. I believe she is obstinate enough to dare the worst.”

Cresswell shrugged his shoulders.

“Tell your story.”

“Why you see, Lou and I have known each other ever so long, ever since I can remember, in fact, and though I always thought she loved me at the bottom, she has played me off and on so many times, and we’ve parted in a huff so often—in short, I learned to love Lou one of the first things, and have acted the fool ever since, to the best of my ability.”

“I presume you had plenty of rivals—Miss Lispenard is handsome, if I remember rightly.”

“Yes, and I’m of a jealous turn, and Lou has temper as well as I. We quarreled pretty often, and didn’t always make up at once.”

“Had you quarreled lately?”

“There was a coldness; but I thought it was just her way. I was waiting for it to pass.”

Ren sighed heavily.

“Miss Lispenard was a coquette,” Cresswell remarked, dryly.

The look of dumb agony that came into his friend’s face at that remark made him look away rebuked.

“She like attention; what woman does not?” Clifford said in a low voice.

“How did you come to be engaged?”

“Naturally enough. I asked her to marry me, and she said yes.”

“Did you think she loved you?”

“She *did*,” replied Clifford, hotly, looking up with a flush.

“I dare say; but if she did she made a greater fool of that young Vesey than she did of you.”

Again that look of mute anguish.

“It don’t matter, only save her,” he said, after a pause.

“It does matter.” Cresswell spoke with such emphasis that his companion started. “Where is Vesey now?”

“Somewhere West. They haven’t met in a long while.”

“What was that about a packet of letters those donkey constables stood by and saw Miss Lispernard burn?”

“She burned some letters; I don’t know whose, or why.”

“Did she correspond with Vesey?”

“Y-e-s,” drearily and with reluctance.

“Would you know Vesey’s hand if you saw it?”

Clifford shook his head.

“I have seen his letters; only the outside, though. I knew them by the paper. He always used tissue paper; and wrote long letters.”

“Precisely. Those were Vesey’s letters she burned the night of her arrest.”

“Why—how?”

“I found this behind the grate where Miss Lispernard burned her letters.”

He showed a bit of scorched tissue paper, at which Ren Clifford started bewildered, but whitening to the lips. The lawyer held it a moment, and carefully returned it to his pocket book.

Clifford looked away, clenching his hands, and then back again, with a flash of eagerness.

“I never could make it out; but she didn’t care for him, Cresswell—I *know* she didn’t.”

The lawyer vouchsafed his friend an indulgent glance—nothing more.

Clifford chafed.

“She made a fool of me, but she loved me,” he said.

Cresswell turned his chair, and laid a hand on his friend’s arm.

“Ren Clifford,” said he, slowly, “I came down here believing as you believe. I’ve changed my mind. Shall I go away now, and take that scrap of Vesey’s letter with me? Better so, unless you have the nerve to stand by, and see the dearest faith of your life shattered.”

Ren's head dropped for a shadow of a moment, and he caught his breath like one choking. The next instant his head went up, and he flung the chestnut curls off his broad white brow proudly.

"I believe in God and my darling, Cresswell. She's been sadly tried, poor pet, and things look black for her, but she is white as an angel."

"I shall stay, then?"

"Stay."

"Untrammelled, free to hunt this thing to earth, though it wreck your faith in *her*?"

"Aye."

Clifford almost laughed in a sort of mad excitement and eagerness, and his handsome eyes glittered with the tears of a fond and enthusiastic loyalty.

"I'm like a hound on the track of guilt."

"So much the better."

Cresswell sat up again with his inquisitorial mask all right.

"When did you see her last?"

"Not since—before."

"And then?"

"Very briefly." The frank face clouded. "She was cold, flurried and pale. She shuddered away from me when I would have caressed her; she sent me away relentlessly, saying she was too ill to see me, though I am almost positive she did not spend the evening alone."

"How?"

"As I rode away, I saw the shadow of a man cross and recross the library blinds."

"Her uncle—"

"No; he was ill—too ill—in bed."

"A servant, possibly."

"Servants do not haunt their mistress's library by the hour!"

“Poor fellow! So you watched the shadow an hour or more!”

“Yes,” setting his teeth.

“And that night poor old Lisperard was murdered?”

Clifford’s head bent.

“Did you tell this at the inquest?”

“Yes.”

“And Miss Lisperard—“

“Met inquiry on that point, as on every other, with blankest silence. That was not all. The servants denied that any one, to their knowledge, had been in the house that evening, save the family and myself.”

“And you?”

“I *knew* to the contrary.”

“Precisely. Vesey was there.”

“No, no,” sharply.

The lawyer glanced at him.

“Be a man, Clifford; face the facts. See here,” fumbling at his pocket book; “no, on the whole I won’t trust you,” thrusting it back in a breast pocket. “Did you say you had not seen Miss Lisperard since the murder?”

“Yes,” wincing. “She won’t see me. She never looked toward me the day of the inquest.”

“I must see her.”

“Yes, yes; she can’t refuse to see you, her lawyer, you know.”

“I shan’t give her the chance,” said Cresswell, dryly as he rose, buttoning his coat and drawing on his gloves.

He didn’t. Having in his pocket the official permit to see her as her lawyer, he followed the announcement if his approach too closely to be denied.

Miss Lisperard frowned at sight of him, and declared, uncourteously enough, that she had no use for a lawyer.

Mr. Cresswell had never chanced to meet the erst belle before, though he had heard enough of her to be surprised now at the figure before him. There was little about this black-browed attenuated girl to identify her with the brilliant beauty of whom he had heard. There were dark rings about her heavy eyes, and her very lips had lost color.

He took no apparent note of her coldness as he put his hat on a chair and sat down.

“My name is Cresswell and Ren Clifford sent me,” he vouchsafed.

“Poor Ren! He might have spared himself the pains,” she said softly.

“Precisely what I said to him,” remarked Cresswell abstractedly.

She shot a curious glance at him. He caught it and held it briefly.

“I never thought you deserved the wild worship Ren gave you.”

“No, don’t talk of it,” a little wearily.

“True—let us talk of other matters. Ingratitude must be an interesting theme to you.”

“I am not ungrateful.”

“Pardon me—you are bitterly so.”

“To whom?”

“To Ren Clifford.”

“To him least of all,” compressing her pallid lips.

“To yourself, then, or to—Conrad Vesey.”

He dropped the name, red hot with emphasis, upon her consciousness, and she shrank livid, as though it seared her, and shuddering with unmistakable horror and repulsion.

Lawyer Cresswell watched her, and then he showed her that scorched scrap of fine French letter paper, and told her where he had found it.

Her eyes dilated, but her face calmed.

“It’s all that remains of the letter in which Vesey told you when he was coming. He did come; he was hid in the library when poor Ren called. Miss Lisperard, do you follow me?”

“You take a new role for a lawyer,” she said, with a strange smile.

“Perhaps, I have a passion for hunting down guilt and wickedness.”

Her face quivered a little.

“You poor child,” the lawyer said, with a sudden emotion in his voice, and catching her little cold hands between his; “trust me.”

She wrenched her hands from him with the look of a hunted animal on her face. She shrank away from him into a corner, and set her teeth resolutely together, and from that moment she would not speak again.

‘Sadly tried, as Ren said,’ the lawyer thought as he left her. “Horribly tried, if he knew, but I’d stake my soul on her innocence, in the face of the blackest appearances. Now for that wretch, Vesey, before he can put an ocean between his guilt and the gallows.”

There was short time for action, and because he saw so well to what a frail tension the cords of life were already strung for Lou Lispenard, because he saw that the thread might snap in too long a probation, he resolved to put in no plea for postponement of the trial at present.

He did not dare trust the air with his suspicions. He knew this Vesey for a knave, artful enough to fatally give him the slip if he once scented a chase. He put a sharp detective on his track, and set himself on track of his guilt. He made himself friendly and conversable with the country round; he went down into Allonby, where Lou Lispenard had spent that summer which she first met Vesey, and since which she had never been the same to Ren Clifford.

Everybody remembered her down there—a brilliant little brunette, dashing through the country avenues with that wicked Vesey always at her bridle rein. It had been a desperate flirtation, if flirtation it was, but he had to go back without anything satisfactory, after all. Satisfied as he might be in his own mind, he had nothing very tangible in the way of proof yet, and not much chance of getting anything unless Vesey was soon found. So far, he had eluded them, and the chances were great that he might get safe out of the country, if, indeed, he were not already gone. The detective had his orders to do nothing but keep an eye on the man if he found him, and telegraph his employer at once. Some vague sympathy with Miss Lispenard kept the lawyer still until then, but he was putting one little thing with another all the time—busy, though so silent—and the conviction, born he could scarce tell how, at first, strengthened every hour.

The murderer of poor old Lispenard, whoever he was, had contrived everything with matchless artfulness. He had covered his tracks in a manner that defied following, unless he could himself be made to speak, or unless Miss Lispenard became communicative. The latter contingency was not to be calculated upon in the least. Lawyer Creswell had seen the young lady several times, but the little communicativeness she had at first displayed, had disappeared, and at all interviews subsequent to the first, she had remained a sealed book, unresponsive to any appeal he could possibly make, silent and impassive, and wasting with the inward fight.

One day Lawyer Cresswell got a telegram from his detective agent. In half an hour he was off. His agent waited for him in the midst of a thriving business metropolis, something like a hundred miles away, and took him for a country drive as soon as he got there.

“There’s your man,” he said, as they drove past a little brick house, with willows by the gate, and a man lounging on the grass with a pipe in his mouth. There were children playing near, and as the lawyer looked back, a woman came to the door, and called the man under the trees to come to dinner.

The lawyer and the detective rode on, the detective talking, the lawyer pondering. He had never seen Vesey but once; he thought this might be like him but he had never supposed him married.

“That’s his wife, and them’s his children,” said the detective, decidedly.

“If I were sure of that—his marriage, I mean—I could see my way,” said the lawyer, thoughtfully fumbling the pocket book which held that scorched scrap of a letter.

“I’ve seen the minister that married ‘em,” said the detective, quietly.

“Why didn’t you say so, man?” cried the lawyer, lashing the horse back to town, where he soon got a constable and a warrant.

It was dark by the time they reached the little brick house again. Their man was snugly housed, knitting the brows over his pipe and a paper that he was not reading, though he made a pretense of doing so.

He made a rush as they opened the door without knocking, and then sat down again, cursing himself for the slip, and calming down to a self-possession and defiance of mien that told the lawyer that he thought himself pretty safe, on the whole, yet.

“So, you’ve got a wife here, too?” remarked Cresswell.

But the man did not answer him, though he shot a strange glance at him, and then at his wife.

Cresswell let the constable start with his prisoner, while he stopped behind to wait for the wife to get over her hysterics. She was eager enough to go with him when he proposed it, and he took her straight over to those intervening miles to Miss Lispenard, to whom he presented her as “Conrad Vesey’s wife.”

A swift redness like a brand leaped to Miss Lispenard’s thin white cheek, as she faced the woman haughtily.

“You?”

Only the monosyllable, but her eyes devoured the woman’s face like a livid flame. The woman shrank a little, but she did not drop her eyes, and she repeated the words.

“Yes, I am his wife these six years.”

Miss Lispanard began to totter; her face was white; the lawyer thought she was going to faint, but she only drooped to a seat, and sat like one stunned.

He led the woman to the door, and came back to Miss Lispenard.

“You will trust me now?” he questioned softly.

“Yes, oh, yes. I can’t die for a wretch like that.”

And then she told him the story. She had met Vesey somewhere before she went to Allonby that summer. He followed her down there, and paid his court in such irresistible fashion as to completely fascinate her against her better judgment. He obtained over that sway that some men always exert over some women. They were secretly married before she went home—secretly, because of her uncle’s rooted aversion to the man—at least that was the pretext. She had not dissolved her engagement to poor Ren, partly because Vesey insisted that she should not, partly through fear of arousing her uncle’s suspicions. Vesey had come secretly to see her that fatal night. It was true that he was in the library when Ren called, and was sent away, disconsolate. Her uncle had been sitting up that day; somehow he suspected and stole upon them, and overheard enough of their talk to conjecture that they were married. His anger was terrible, and in the heat of it, he promised his niece that his will should be altered the next day, and she left out of it. In the midst of his passion, weak and ill as he was, he fainted, and they, not liking to expose matters to the servants, had between them got him back to his bed. Vesey sent her away, promising to follow as the old man came to. It was half an hour before he came, and then he was like a man out of his grave, so strange and still, though he pretended to jest, and staid some two hours longer. He was still there when the old servant, going to her uncle’s room, discovered that he had been murdered, and raised the house. His last words to her before he crept out of the house, had been a warning to tell no one he had been there, lest he might be accused of the deed.

That was all. Vesey had killed her uncle to stop his altering his will. The unscrupulous villain had calculated upon securing the poor old man’s wealth through his niece.

They convicted him easily enough. There were a hundred damning evidences of his guilt brought to light, when once public attention was called to him.

As for Lou Lispenard, she shrank away into such shocked seclusion that for two whole years Ren Clifford never saw her face. But his love outlived all, and received what to him was adequate reward at last. Lou became his wife.

The New York Ledger, September 22, 1866