

## *The Closest Shave of My Life*

THE State Prison at C— is every way considered under a better organized and surer system of administration than any similar institution I have known. I have seen many, and looked somewhat closely into their methods of management and discipline, and have often seen much to approve; but the prison at C— surpasses all the rest. Visitors, of whom very properly but few are admitted, are amazed at the regularity, the order, and, most singular of all, the air of security and exceeding quiet that prevails.

As we wandered through the chambers in the freer part of the prison, we came to one from the window of which a man was looking so anxiously that he did not hear us enter. When he turned round, his eyes were glistening with tears. The warden said he did nothing but stand at that window at all times when he was unoccupied. He was a sailor, we learned, whose offence was that he had beaten almost to death a comrade for speaking slightly about his wife. He was in for three years, six months of which had passed, and he was one of the best men about the prison. They had found out that he was accomplished—that there was no better barber anywhere; so he was elevated above his fellows to the extent of a dignified position, and the responsibility of razors.

“He has shaved me many a time better than I could do it myself. Would you like a prison shave, gentlemen?” said the warden.

I thought there was something quite taking in the idea, and acknowledged myself to be touched favorably with the proposition.

“Johnson, you will shave this gentleman,” said the warden.

I threw off my coat and settled myself comfortably in the big chair. Johnson made grave preparations.

I always hated a razor. It is a villainous necessity. I wonder if anybody thinks it delightful, that hissing of the sharp steel over the cheek, and that slow scrape over the throat, with the skin drawn drum-tight.

When my face was shining with the soap, the warden said—

“We will leave you for five minutes, Mr. H—. Is that time enough, Johnson?”

“Quite time enough, sir,” answered Johnson.

The prisoner and I were left alone. My companions went away in another direction from that we had been pursuing, and the warden swung the door wide open as he passed through, leaving it unclosed. From my position I saw them walk along the top of the wall until they came to a corner, where they spoke a little with the officer in charge. Then they moved on, officer and all, out of sight.

Upon each corner of the prison wall a guard is always stationed, well armed, to watch that no attempts at escape are made. The moment this one disappeared, I felt a sort of faint shiver of the razor against my lip. Immediately after my barber ceased operations, walked leisurely to the door and looked out, and returning, paused an instant at the window where we had found him when we entered. Then he came back to me and resumed his work. I felt vaguely alarmed.

Presently the prisoner spoke. His voice was very low, quite a whisper indeed, and he cut his words short. But how distinct they were!

“Do you hear me, sir?” he asked.

“Yes,” said I.

“It’s a ticklish thing, this shaving, isn’t it?” said he. “But my hand is always steady. I can do what I please with a razor—just what I please. Be good enough to keep still, very still, just now. I’m close on to a large vein, you see, right in your neck, keep very still, and don’t stir. I know what would happen, and so do you, if you stirred or spoke a word.”

Good God! These were hideous words; but the glare of the man’s eye, as he came round in front of me, was appalling. I could not have uttered a syllable if I had died otherwise.

“Now,” said he, “listen, but don’t move,” and he pressed the flat blade against my throat, as if by way of warning. “I don’t like this. I can’t stand it. I’m *going*. And so help me God, if you lift a finger to stop me, or make one noise, both of us will have to die! I would a little rather not hurt you; but—Remember!”

He sprang away, and caught up my coat and hat, which lay near, still keeping the razor in his hand. The moment its frightful contact was removed my inertness vanished. I leaped up, seized the chair in which I had been sitting, and shouted lustily. He turned upon me like a tiger.

“Ah, you will have it, then!” he cried, and rushed toward me.

I thrust him aside with the heavy chair, and lifting it high in the air, brought it down crashing upon him. He sank for a second, but quickly rose again. He was heavier than I, and twice as strong, I suppose. Persons who have thus been in positions of great danger will not be astonished to hear that I forgot, after my first cry, to call out at all. I thought only of defending myself.

This state of things did not last a quarter of a minute. He would have beaten me down soon enough, had I not in sheer desperation, made use of a trick which I had once before seen successfully employed. I moved my eyes suddenly from him, and stared wildly into the space behind him, pointing at the same time and in the same direction with my arm. By a lucky chance I pointed to the window.

I think that movement saved my life.

He stopped, irresolute, glanced at the window, flung his hands above his head, gasped as if he were choking, and, dashing the razor against the stone wall, fell trembling upon his knees. As I stepped swiftly across the floor, he called out to me:

“Don’t go, don’t go!” he said. “Stand there at the door, if you choose, but wait a minute. It’s all over now; and perhaps, if you hear me, you won’t wonder that I was driven mad.”

I hardly knew how to act; but as I involuntarily checked my steps, he continued:

“Look out at that window, sir, and you’ll see just over the road, a woman with a child in her arms, standing in a doorway. That’s my wife and baby— my poor wife and baby. She doesn’t know I’m here—thank God for that. I came here under a wrong name, and she supposes I’m far away at sea. I am sure it would break her heart to know the truth. Well, sir, that’s my home. I’ve seen it and I’ve seen her every day now these three months. It used to make me crazy, but I bear it better now. But this chance—this great chance—was too much for me. And to think that I came near losing all hope of ever seeing her again!”

Could I doubt those struggling sobs and tears? There was truth in every tone. I looked through the window, and saw, as he had told me, a woman standing on a threshold opposite, with a little child. She tossed it up laughingly once or twice, and disappeared.

“You won’t trust me, I know,” said the prisoner; “but I want to beg you not to let the warden know of this. It’s no use, I know. Well, I swear that I’ll be true to home after this. Nothing but three years solitary now, and who can live through that? No, no, you’ll let this go by, won’t you? You may believe me—you may indeed.”

Feet shuffling along the passages announced the return of my companions. The prisoner endeavored to calm himself, and I put on an air of unconcern which I think was very successful under the circumstances.

“Not shaved yet?” said the warden, astonished. If he had but known how close a shave I had been through.

“I have broken my razor,” said Johnson, looking appealingly at me. “See, Sir! I must have another.”

“Very well,” said the warden. “Will you wait?” he asked me.

“I think not,” said I. “Another time will do for me.”

So I wiped my face, and we went on our way.

Of course I was bound to tell the warden what had happened; but even in that great excitement which naturally followed so narrow an escape I think I set forward all that I could in the poor fellow’s favor. The warden received the story with perfect composure, and assured me that he would act in such a manner as he thought the occasion needed. He condemned his own heed-

lessness in opening so evident an opportunity for guilt with much more earnestness than he spoke of the event itself.

I could not resist visiting the wife of Johnson. I discovered that his story was true, and learned his real name. She was happy in her ignorance of his real condition. I sought to ascertain whether she was able to sustain herself until he should rejoin her; and then she told me that Mr.—, the warden of the prison, had also come to her, shown interest in her behalf, for which she could not well account, and assured her of his aid and protection in any need that might come to her. She was most grateful, but wondered why he had done so.

A few months ago the following newspaper paragraph appeared. It was much copied, and, I suppose, will be readily remembered:—

“It is the custom at the prison in C— to permit prisoners whose terms are within a few weeks of expiration, to work outside the walls under the supervision of an officer. This privilege is, in most cases, gladly accepted. A few weeks ago, however, it was declined by a man who, as his time of freedom drew near, appeared more restless under his confinement than any others. On inquiry it was found that this prisoner had a wife and child living directly within view of the walls, and that for nearly three years he had seen her daily, she being all the while ignorant of his imprisonment, and supposing that her husband, who is a sailor, was at sea, on a long voyage. He was unwilling that, at the last moment, the fact should be revealed to her; and, at his own request, he continued within the walls until his liberation, which took place last week. Excepting on one occasion, his conduct while in prison had been without blemish.”

*Harper's Weekly*, December 17, 1859

*Detroit Free Press*, February 8, 1862

*Strange Stories of a Detective; or, Curiosities of Crime*. New York: Dick & Fitzgerald, 1863. 83-6.