

A Narrow Escape

by C. J. Stone

“HOT, hotter, hottest!” I exclaim, as I enter my apartments on an extremely warm June evening. I seat myself in my most comfortable chair, open my cigar-case, elevate my feet to a proper angle for comfort, lay my head back against the cushion of my chair, and prepare to rest myself, for I am very tired. All day I have been busy in the bank where I am cashier. During banking hours there has been a rush, and afterward plenty of work until a late hour; so now I sit lazily watching the blue smoke from my Havana curling in rings and spirals above my head.

As I sit so, a sound of weeping—a low, stifled sobbing—is gradually wafted into my room. I listen. It evidently comes from the adjoining apartment. In that case my landlady must have a new lodger, and that this lodger is most respectable and a lady, I am satisfied.

Of the former I give myself no further thought, knowing Mrs. Rodgers has been fully satisfied on that score before the person was admitted into her house. Mrs. Rodgers prides herself on the respectability of her house, and woe to the unfortunate individual who attempts to seek a home therein without the best of references.

That she is a lady I am convinced by the sound of her voice, for there is a refinement in weeping as in speaking. As I listen I cannot avoid hearing. I fall to speculating about my fellow-lodger, and the probable cause of her grief, and finally settle down to the theory that she is a widow, mourning the loss of her dear departed.

My reverie was brought to an end by the sound of the dinner bell. I go, for I am ravenously hungry as well as tired.

I had scarcely seated myself at the table, when, glancing toward the door, I beheld the most charming picture that ever met man’s gaze.

A slim, graceful figure, clothed in the deepest mourning; raven black hair, curling in little clinging tendrils over a broad, low brow; great pathetic brown eyes, and drooping, rosebud mouth. But pen cannot do justice to her charm, for it was not merely beauty of face, but there was a certain charm in her every movement that was irresistible.

She hesitated a moment, as though she scarcely knew where to go, and then coming in, seated herself almost opposite me. I glanced at her as often as I dared, and once, when her eyes met mine, I fancied there were tears in them.

All the next day a pair of brown eyes would intrude themselves between me and my work, and it was with a feeling of relief that I found myself in my room again. There was not a sound in the next room, but a soft little sigh at the window told me my neighbor was in, and doubtlessly thinking of the lost mother.

Mrs. Rodgers had told me her mother was dead, and an uncle, her only remaining relative, had brought her here until he could arrange a home for them. She also informed me that she did not think the uncle a very fit protector for the young girl, and that she was badly in need of friends.

Again I found her seated opposite me at the table, and again I saw the tears.

“Come into the drawing room, my dear,” I heard Mrs. Rodgers say, as she met the young lady in the hall after dinner. “I fear you are lonely. Remember, we will consider you a most welcome addition to our little circle.”

She thanked Mrs. Rodgers in the sweetest voice that I had ever heard, and glided into the room, where I was not long in following.

We were duly presented by our landlady, and gradually fell into conversation. I never knew a more graceful or accomplished woman than Rose Vane. There was a charm about her lightest movement, her smallest word.

This was the beginning of many delightful evenings. Long walks in the soft evening twilight; drives in shaded lanes, with the soft summer air blowing about us, tossing her beautiful hair in a thousand little curling rings about her sweet face. I write of her as I believed her to be then, not as I knew her afterward.

I think I loved her from the moment I saw her standing in the dining room door, black-robed and lonely. So when autumn tinted all nature with its coloring of scarlet and gold, she laid her soft hand in mine and promised to become my wife, I was the happiest of mortals. The wedding was to be a quiet one, though I would have preferred it otherwise.

“I could not,” my darling had said to me once, when speaking of it, “have anything but a very quiet wedding so soon after dear mother’s death.”

“It shall be as you desire, my love,” I replied, and loved her more dearly than before, if that was possible, little dreaming of the duplicity being practiced upon me.

I had arranged for an absence that would give us time to visit some of the most notable places in America, but here again I found my quiet little bride opposing me. She had so much rather go to some quiet place where we could be alone together. It would be so much nicer. Did I not think so? Of course I did.

So we found ourselves in a quiet little village of my wife’s selecting, where we were not likely to be disturbed by old friends or new acquaintances, so out of the way it was.

I never knew my wife to evince the least interest in my affairs but once, and that was almost immediately after our marriage. She had asked me a great many questions about the position I held in the bank, when she suddenly exclaimed:

“Why, George, if you are cashier you must understand the combinations of the safe containing the money and securities of the bank?”

“Certainly I do,” I replied. “Mr. Ford, the president, and myself, are the only ones who do understand them.”

“Oh, do tell them to me!” she exclaimed, delightedly; and, seeing my hesitation: “You need not be afraid to tell me. Am I not your wife?”

“What do you wish to know for?” I queried, laughingly.

“I just wondered what it was like. But you need not tell me, of course,” she replied, coldly.

I complied with her request, going over the combinations as rapidly as possible, not wishing her to understand them.

“Oh, George, you said it so fast, I could not understand. Do please repeat them again.”

I did so, changing them this time.

“You naughty fellow, you changed them!” she cried; and to my utter astonishment she repeated word for word each as I had given them.

“I thought you did not hear?” I replied.

“I was not sure. But the first was right, was it not?” she persisted.

“Yes,” I answered, and thought no more about it, though Heaven knows I had good reasons to remember it afterward.

We remained in our Arcadian retreat for some time, but as I had arranged for a rather long absence, I had also arranged to combine business with pleasure, and it was absolutely necessary for me to visit several cities before my return. I acquainted my wife with this. She desired me to go, leaving her, finish my business, and return for her. But as I would not listen to such a proposal, she finally consented to accompany me.

Our first destination was Niagara, and I was greatly disappointed that she did not show more enthusiasm when visiting this great wonder of nature. I observed then, and during all our travels, that my wife, whether in the cars, a carriage, or on the street, was always heavily veiled, and when I remarked this, and inquired the cause, she replied that her eyes were weak, and she wore the veil as a protection.

I could never induce her to dine publicly; she always insisted on having all our meals sent to our apartments, and strenuously exacted a promise wherever we stopped that I would ask no one to dine with us.

“Why, my darling, do you wish to live so retired? Nothing, I assure you, would give me more pleasure than to present my wife to my friends,” I said, and she replied that the position of hostess was so new to her and she felt so sad about poor mamma, that she was not equal to the task; and she would look so distressed and sad, that I had not the heart to oppose her.

I shall always believe the woman, wicked as I afterward knew her to be, was really miserable and unhappy at the part she was playing.

Autumn passed away, and the winter season opened with a series of the most brilliant entertainments ever given in our city. We came in for a large share of patronage—in fact, were invited everywhere—but it was with the greatest difficulty I could induce my wife to become a participant at these splendid receptions.

I could not help wondering at this, for she was always the most brilliant woman in the assembly, as well as the most beautifully dressed.

Indeed, her dress was a mystery to me; for, although I gave her a liberal supply of money for one in my circumstances, I was sufficiently versed in such matters to know that such costumes as my wife wore were not purchased with the amount of money I gave her; for while they were quiet and in the best possible taste, they were of the most expensive material to be purchased.

She was courted and flattered by everyone, and the amount of admiration she received would have spoiled almost any woman. Not so with her; indeed, she had often come to me amidst the gayest throng with a look in her beautiful face I could not resist, and beg me to take her away.

The last entertainment we attended together is indelibly impressed on my memory. I had rather opposed going, but for once my wife seemed intent on becoming a participant.

“It is one of the most aristocratic and exclusive affairs of the season,” she urged, “and I am really anxious to attend, as everyone seems to consider it quite an honor to receive cards for the De Voe reception.”

“Very well, my dear,” I replied. “If you really wish to go we will consider the matter settled.”

“You are very kind. Of course, I know all about these exclusive affairs,” she said, laughingly. “It is a place where one generally meets everyone.”

“Not at this place, my dear,” I answered. “You will find this entertainment quite exclusive enough to satisfy even your ideas of exclusiveness.”

The all-important evening arrived. I had been on the *qui vive* for my wife’s costume, as I felt sure her toilet would surpass any of her former attempts, and I must say I was not a little uneasy, for I was in daily expectation of a small mountain of unpaid bills, though as yet none had been presented. So if I expected a rather expensively attired female, and was mentally calculating unpaid bills, imagine my consternation when my wife, laying aside her cloak, stood before me rivaling an Eastern princess in the richness of her attire.

Her dress was composed of rich black velvet of almost priceless value, richly brocaded in the most beautiful, elaborate and expensive designs; a comb of curiously wrought gold, studded with rubies and diamonds, caught up the glossy, raven hair; a necklace of the purest diamonds encircled her white throat and shone on her shapely arms; a brooch of the same costly gems fastened the rich, webby collar, and clasped the belt at her waist.

A hum of admiration went around the room as we entered, and my feelings can better be imagined than described. Later in the evening, as I was standing partly concealed by a curtain, I heard my name pronounced, and before I could reveal myself the following conversation was wafted to me:

“Grayson is going pretty heavy,” said the first speaker.

“Yes,” answered the other; “or his wife is, which is about the same.”

“Where will it end?”

“In a trip to Canada,” was the laconic reply.

I moved quickly away, to prevent my knocking the fellow down. It was not until we had reached our own room that I ventured to inquire the cost of my wife’s costume.

“It cost you nothing,” she replied, shortly, in answer to my inquiry. “The diamonds were my mother’s, and the dress I had before I married you.”

“Well, my dear, I did not mean to find fault, but I did not suppose you possessed such expensive jewels, and if you will give me the amount of your indebtedness I will attend to it at once.”

“Indebtedness!” she repeated, in surprise. “Indebtedness! I am not in debt. I have purchased nothing since I have been here.” And then seeming to remember herself, she added: “I did not come to you entirely penniless. My mother left me a small portion, amounting to a few thousand dollars, which I did not think necessary to mention to you.”

I made no reply, though I cannot say I was exactly pleased at my wife’s secrecy. I did not want, nor would I have touched, a penny of her money; but I thought she might have done me the honor to tell me she possessed the amount.

The busy season was at hand; even bankers have their busy season, and there was a rush from the hour of opening until that of closing. On this account I found it one evening imperatively necessary for me to remain far beyond the usual hour, finishing some work which had been neglected in the rush during banking hours. I was too tired when I arrived home to enjoy the exquisite little supper my wife had caused prepared, or the bottle of champagne, a thing we did not often indulge in, which she had ordered for me.

Although I ate but little and drank but a single glass of wine, I had scarcely retired to bed when I became alarmingly ill. I requested Rose to call one of the servants and dispatch her for a physician, but she declared she had a remedy that would effect [sic] a cure, and tripped away to get it.

I heard her speaking in a low tone to someone, but supposed it to be one of the servants. In a moment she came back and administered the medicine she had brought, and which afforded immediate relief.

I soon fell into a heavy slumber, from which I did not awake until a late hour the next morning. I was greatly annoyed to find how late the hour really was, and I could not help asking my wife, in a vexed tone, why she did not arouse me at the usual time.

“You were so ill, and I thought they could do without you for one day,” she answered.

“But I have the key,” I replied.

“Has not Mr. Ford a key?” she asked.

“Yes; but he seldom ever has it, as I am the first in the morning and the last to leave in the evening. Has anyone been here?” I asked.

“Yes; the boy was here, and I told him you were sick.”

I afterward learned she had informed him I had not been home all night.

By this time I had drunk my coffee, donned my outer coat, and was ready for the street.

I was not long in reaching the bank. Mr. Ford was standing just inside as I entered.

“I am late,” I said; “I was afraid you would have trouble in getting in, but I suppose you had your key?”

“Yes, I had; but I had no occasion to use it, as someone who possesses a key as well as a knowledge of the combination, was here before me. In short, we have been robbed.”

Robbed! Had a key and knew the combination! I was sick when I left home, and now my knees trembled under me so I could not stand. I sank into the nearest chair and began to pull at my collar, for I felt that I was suffocating and must have air. By this time several of the clerks had entered. I glanced at them and then at Mr. Ford. That gentleman was standing with his hands thrust in his pockets, eyeing me intently, and then suspicion slowly dawned upon me that I was the one suspected of the crime.

Great heavens! This was horrible! Circumstances were against me, I knew, but surely I could prove an alibi.

Just then a person whom I recognized as a detective, came in. He and Mr. Ford had a long interview, and I observed the latter from time to time shake his head as though he could not make up his mind to believe what the detective was trying to impress upon him.

All through the long hours of the morning the thought kept recurring to my mind, "What will Rose say if this suspicion reaches her?" for although no word had been said, I knew everyone suspected me of the crime.

I had not been in the habit of going home for lunch, but this day I turned my steps homeward, for I felt this was our first trouble and I wished to be the one to impart the news to her.

On reaching home, I opened the hall-door softly, and hearing the sound of voices and not wishing to disturb my wife and her visitor, I entered the library and stepped behind a curtain, a position that would enable me to view the interior of the drawing room without myself being seen.

What was my surprise to see my wife sitting in close proximity to a dark-haired, dark-eyed man, with anything but a prepossessing face; the same, in fact, that I had met in the hotel while on our bridal tour, and between them was the white beard and wig her uncle had worn when on a visit to us. They were talking when I entered, and the first words that reached me were from my wife.

"Do you think they will arrest him?" she was saying.

"They can't very well do anything else," the man replied, "as no one knew the combination but he and the president."

"Might they not arrest the president?"

"No; he was there early, and I tell you there was a commotion when Grayson did not come. What did you tell the boy they sent down?" queried the man.

"That he had not been home all night."

"Ha! ha! you managed well, my dear. It will net us—" (Mentioning the exact amount in money and securities we had lost). "And the money?" he said, anxiously.

"Is safe in the false bottom of my trunk," the woman answered. "This is to be my last," she continued. "The first victim's time has almost expired, and young B— is dying in the penitentiary."

I remembered this young cashier being tried for this offense, and convicted on circumstantial evidence, though the money was never recovered.

What I would have done I know not, but as I made an effort to leave my retreat, a voice whispered a most peremptory "Keep still!" in my ear, and glancing up, I discovered the detective I had seen with Mr. Ford, in the morning.

He gave a signal at the window, and in less than two minutes the two plotters found themselves under arrest for bank-robbery.

A shriek from the woman and a curse from the man were the last thing I remember hearing. I never saw the woman afterward. They had their trial and got several years in the penitentiary.

Yesterday was the fourth anniversary, and as I sat alone brooding over my troubles, a note was handed to me. It was from the woman, telling me she was dying and asking me to come to her, and the paper lying before me contains a notice of her death.

At the trial it was discovered I had been the third victim. The other two had gone to the State prison, and one of them was in a dying condition when freedom was given him. The man, as a pretended relative, disguised himself and selected his victim, and then brought the woman to finish the job. Of course, the disgraced wife had always been allowed to go whither she pleased, and in this way they had escaped until this time, when I had been so miraculously saved.

Frank Leslie's Popular Monthly, July 1885

To see the illustration that originally accompanied this story, [click here](#) and you will be redirected to *Frank Leslie's Popular Monthly*.