



Rose Delacroix Versus the Box

By Jeremy Phillips

Rose Delacroix sat on a stump in the bare and dusty yard behind the Delacroix Hotel, staring at a metal box sitting on another stump, a few feet away from her. She regarded the box with an ever-increasing intensity, not sure how to proceed. Time was very short, and she wished that she had more of it available to her right now.

“Whatever am I going to do with you?” Rose said to the box.

The box didn’t look like much. It was the size of a shoebox, but constructed of solid steel, with tight, straight corners. Its only visible feature was a place for a key to fit, in the front of the box. Really, it seemed simple enough. But looks, as Rose knew very well, are often deceptive.

In her hand, Rose held a couple of metal clips from out of her hair, clips which she had straightened out to use for this particular purpose. Except, it hadn’t worked yet. Rose approached the box again, the box which had at first glance appeared to be so simple, and yet had thwarted all of her prior attempts at entry.

Rose shook the box, which was deceptively heavy in addition to being deceptively difficult to break. Something solid thumped around inside of it. Whatever it was, Rose meant to have it out of that box, and soon.

Drawing a deep, calming breath, Rose tried once more to pick the lock on this thing. The books she's been reading, the Sherlock Holmes mysteries in addition to other lesser Detective tales, always make this seem so simple, don't they?

Using one of the hair pins that she had straightened out, Rose carefully massaged the top of the lock, to where she believed the pins that she needed to trick ought to be. She could feel the pins moving, so that was good. With a second hair pin, she applied a constant pressure on the bottom of the lock in the hopes of popping it open, when the pins were all equally deceived into believing that the proper key had been applied into the keyhole.

After another long effort, she stopped again. What time was it getting to be, now?

Really, she needed to pop this lock open. She needed, rather desperately, to *know* what was inside of this thing. All of her logic told Rose that whatever was inside of this deceptively secure box, was of vital importance to her investigation. Even as she sat there in this yard, monkeying around with this locked box, her brother Jon was confronting the box's owner. Jon needed her, and he needed her *now*, not whenever it was that she managed to finally get this thing open.

Perhaps the problem was too obvious. This box, which she had confiscated, perhaps inappropriately, from its hiding place in a guest room of the Delacroix Hotel, belonged to a man who liked to think of himself as the world's greatest "cracksman." This was a term that Rose had only recently learned, but which referred to the man's impressive ability to break into locked safes. Given the great trouble that this person had managed to cause to Rose and her family in the last few days, he had a point concerning his abilities, after all.

Rose took a moment, and tried to think about the problem logically. She had in her possession the small personal safe of a man who considered himself to be the greatest safe-breaker in the world. It only stood to reason, that the security on the safe of such a person would defy any normal attempts at lock picking.

Really, attempting to pick the thing was ridiculous, given the fact that she was an amateur at this sort of thing in the first place. Rose was self-taught, having only popped a few locks around town during her free time when no one was looking, to see if she could do it. To Rose's way of thinking, skills such as lock picking were just the sorts of things that a self-styled Detective simply ought to know, after all.

Not that everyone was likely to understand this. She put this into the same category of small-minded thinking as seemed to possess most people that she met, the same type of small-minded thinking which implied that, given her status as a female, she was simply incapable of actual logic thought. Or much else, either. This was in the category of things that she simply refused to agree to wholesale, in other words.

Turning the safe around and looking into the keyhole with the aid of the heavy summer sunlight, Rose suddenly understood the problem more fully. The lock itself seemed to run deeper than most locks did, and what's more, there appeared to be pins on the right interior side of the lock too. Those extra pins were placed at a different angle than were normally seen, in all of the others locks that Rose had encountered around the town of Hope Springs. This was actually a rather extraordinary lock, which would take a rather extraordinary key. It was a lock the likes of which Rose had never encountered before.

Given enough time, Rose was fairly sure that she could have broken the lock anyway. It would require another hair pin, and perhaps another hand too, to apply pressure to the lock with the tension wire while she worked at the pins from two different angles at once. But, time was something that she simply didn't have much of. This was going to require a different approach.

Rose placed the box back on the tree stump, then went into a large work shed, which was attached to the barn in the family's back yard. She returned a minute later with the heaviest wood chopping axe that she could find, and took a mighty swing at the top of the metallic box.

The first blow did nothing but mildly dent the box, causing it to bounce a foot or so up into the air with the force of her assault. A second and third blow did little more. But on her fourth attempt, after getting a reckless running start at the metal box from the other side of the yard, Rose managed to lodge the blade of the axe into the top of the steel box. Rose's arms were feeling sore already, from the exertions of trying to break this thing.

It was almost comical. The axe was now lodged directly into the lid of the steel box. Feeling her anxiety increase, Rose wondered what time it was now getting to be. She wondered how things were going for Jon, who was even now confronting the burglar...a man who, the night before, had proven that he was not above pulling a gun on her brother. He might not be above murder, even.

With great effort, Rose was able to pry the axe blade back out of the top of the box. This left a large cut along the middle of the lid of the thing, but she could still not get to the contents of the box, or even really see what those contents were, rolling around inside of that damned box.

Rose set the box up on its edge. This time, it would have to work. She stepped back again, hefting the axe up over her head. She stepped back farther, and farther yet. An absurd feeling came over Rose, as though she were a baseball player up at bat, facing the third strike in the last inning of a tight game.

Well, and wasn't that pretty much what this was, after all? How much time did Jon really have, facing off with that criminal? This was her last inning, and what all was on the line? Only the freedom and future of her other brother, Bill, who had been framed for two robberies and one attempted murder that he didn't commit. Oh, and the possibility of the entire Delacroix family losing their ownership of the Delacroix Hotel to another criminal, and being kicked out into the streets of Hope Springs in the summer of 1893; there was that minor detail, too. Only those things. And Jon.

Steadying herself, Rose took a deep breath. In her mind's eye, she imagined the cut that she would have to inflict to make this thing happen. She's read someplace about the power of the mind, the power to make things happen by carefully visualizing them, first. This was something she believed in wholeheartedly.

The blow would have to be perfect. It would have to land squarely on the edge of the lid, to exactly where the hinge must be. Only that. Or else, perhaps she could go over to the Blacksmith's shop and see if he couldn't pop the thing open for her somehow. But there would be a lot of questions asked, then. And a lot of precious time wasted. She thought again of Jon, headed over to the Bromwell Hotel, across the street.

With a cry, Rose ran wholeheartedly up towards the box, to where it sat there on the tree stump. She brought the axe down with all her might, producing a bone-jarring ringing in her hands clear up to the shoulder, an ear-cracking SMACK when the unstoppable force of her axe came down on the immovable object of the steel box's lid...and then the miracle happened.

The blow was perfect, more perfect than seemed fair. The hinge of the box gave way, and the contents of the box flew everywhere, scattering around to land everyplace on the dusty ground.

Rose quickly rushed around the yard, ignoring the ringing pain in her arms, picking up the box's former contents and placing them back in the now-broken box.

There was a little leather pouch full of lock picks, proper ones, made of some fine thin steel that Rose had never seen before. These she would keep, if things turned out as she hoped they might. There was also a collection of paper money and coins. And there, sitting separate and apart from the rest of the stuff, was a round object about the size of an apple.

Quickly picking the object up, Rose examined it closely.

After a few moments a large smile came across her face, as she realized what the object in her hand was...and what it meant, for her and her all-consuming Investigation. This was becoming like a Sherlock Holmes story after all, Rose thought, which filled her with excitement and a powerful sense of adventure, although she might not have admitted this to anyone, perhaps not even to her twin brother John.

Holding on to the object and rushing out to Main Street, Rose found herself running as quickly as she could to go help her brother. Yes, this might help fix things. It might help fix things very well.

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