

The Sealed Room

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For many years there stood in a side street in Kiel an unpretentious old frame house which had a forbidding, almost sinister appearance, with its old-fashioned balcony and its overhanging upper stories. For the last twenty years the house had been occupied by a greatly respected widow, Madame Wolff, to whom the dwelling had come by inheritance. She lived there quietly with her one daughter, in somewhat straitened circumstances.

What gave the house a mysterious notoriety, augmenting the sinister quality in its appearance, was the fact that one of its rooms, a corner room on the main floor, had not been opened for generations. The door was firmly fastened and sealed with plaster, as well as the window looking out upon the street. Above the door was an old inscription, dated 1603, which threatened sudden death and eternal damnation to any human being who dared to open the door or efface the inscription. Neither door nor window had been opened in the two hundred years that had passed since the inscription was put up. But for a generation back or more, the partition wall and the sealed door had been covered with wall paper, and the inscription had been almost forgotten.

The room adjoining the sealed chamber was a large hall, utilized only for rare important events. Such an occasion arose with the wedding of the only daughter of the house. For that evening the great hall, as it was called, was brilliantly decorated and illuminated for a ball. The building had deep cellars and the old floors were elastic. Madame Wolff had in vain endeavored to avoid using the great hall at all, for the foolish old legend of the sealed chamber aroused a certain superstitious dread in her heart, and she rarely if ever entered the hall herself. But merry Miss Elizabeth, her pretty young daughter, was passionately fond of dancing, and her mother had promised that she should have a ball on her wedding day. Her betrothed, Secretary Winther, was also a good dancer, and the two young people combated the mother's prejudice against the hall and laughed at her fear of the sealed room. They thought it would be wiser to appear to ignore the stupid legend altogether, and thus to force the world to forget it. In spite of secret misgivings Madame Wolff yielded to their arguments. And for the first time in many years the merry strains of dance music were heard in the great hall that lay next the mysterious sealed chamber.

The bridal couple, as well as the wedding guests, were in the gayest mood, and the ball was an undoubted success. The dancing was interrupted for an hour while supper was served in an adjoining room. After the repast the guests returned to the hall, and it was several hours more before the last dance was called. The season was early autumn and the weather still balmy. The windows had been opened to freshen the air. But the walls retained their dampness and suddenly the dancers noticed that the old wall paper which covered the partition wall between the hall and the sealed chamber had been loosened through the jarring of the building, and had fallen away from the sealed door with its mysterious inscription.

The story of the sealed chamber had been almost forgotten by most of those present, forgotten with many other old legends heard in childhood. The inscription thus suddenly revealed naturally aroused great interest, and there was a general curiosity to know what the mysterious closed room might hide. Conjectures flew from mouth to mouth. Some insisted that the closed door must hide the traces of a hideous murder, or some other equally terrible crime. Others suggested that perhaps the room had been used as a hiding place for garments and other articles belonging to some person who had died of a pestilence, and that the room had been sealed for fear of spreading the disease. Still others thought that in the sealed chamber there might be found a secret entrance from the cellars, which had made the room available as a hiding place for robbers or smugglers. The guests had quite forgotten their dancing in the interest awakened by the sight of the mysterious door.

"For mercy's sake, don't let's go too near it!" exclaimed some of the young ladies. But the majority thought it would be great fun to see what was hidden there. Most of the men said that they considered it foolish not to have opened the door long ago, and examined the room. The young bridegroom did not join in this opinion, however.

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He upheld the decision of his mother-in-law not to allow any attempt to effect an entrance into the room. He knew that there was a clause in the title deeds to the house which made the express stipulation that no owner should ever permit the corner room to be opened. There was discussion among the guests as to whether such a clause in a title deed could be binding for several hundred years, and many doubted its validity at any time. But most of them understood why Madame Wolff did not wish any investigation, even should any of those present have sufficient courage to dare the curse and break open the door.

"Nonsense! What great courage is necessary for that?" exclaimed Lieutenant Flemming Wolff, a cousin of the bride of the evening. This gentleman had a reputation that was not of the best. He was known to live mostly on debt and pawn tickets, and was of a most quarrelsome disposition. As a duelist he was feared because of his specialty. This was the ability, and the inclination, through a trick in the use of the foils, to disfigure his opponent's face badly, without at all endangering his life. In this manner he had already sadly mutilated several brave officers and students, who had had the bad luck to stand up against him. He himself was anything but pleasant to look upon, his natural plainness having been rendered repellent by a life of low debauchery. He cherished a secret grudge against the bridegroom and bitter feelings toward the bride, because the latter had so plainly shown her aversion for him when he had ventured to pay suit to her.

The family had not desired any open break with this disagreeable relative, and had therefore sent him an invitation to the wedding. They had taken it for granted that, under the circumstances, he would prefer to stay away. But he had appeared at the ball, and, perhaps to conceal his resentment, he had been the most indefatigable dancer of the evening. At supper he had partaken freely of the strongest wines, and was plainly showing the effect of them by this time. His eyes rolled wildly, and those who knew him took care not to contradict him, or to have anything to say to him at all.

With a boastful laugh he repeated his assertion that it didn't take much courage to open a sealed door, especially when there might be a fortune concealed behind it. In his opinion it was cowardly to let oneself be frightened by a century-old legend. HE wouldn't let that bother him if HE had influence enough in the family to win the daughter and induce the mother to give a ball in the haunted hall. With this last hit he hoped to arouse the young husband's ire. But the latter merely shrugged his shoulders and turned away with a smile of contempt.

Lieutenant Wolff fired up at this, and demanded to know whether the other intended to call his, the lieutenant's, courage into question by his behavior.

"Not in the slightest, when it is a matter of obtaining a loan, or of mutilating an adversary with a trick at fencing," answered the bridegroom angrily, taking care, however, that neither the bride nor any of the other ladies should hear his words. Then he continued in a whisper: "But I don't believe you'd have the courage to remain here alone and in darkness, before this closed door, for a single hour. If you wish to challenge me for this doubt, I am at your disposal as soon as you have proven me in the wrong. But I choose the weapons."

"They must be chosen by lot, sir cousin," replied the lieutenant, his cheek pale and his jaws set. "I will expect you to breakfast to-morrow morning at eight o'clock."

The bridegroom nodded, and took the other's cold dry hand for an instant. The men who had overheard the short conversation looked upon it as a meaningless incident, the memory of which would disappear from the lieutenant's brain with the vanishing wine fumes.

The ball was now over. The bride left the hall with her husband and several of the guests who were to accompany the young couple to their new home. The lights went out in the old house. The door of the dancing hall had been locked from the outside. Lieutenant Flemming Wolff remained alone in the room, having hidden himself in a dark corner where he had not been seen by the servants, who had extinguished the lights and locked the door. The night watchman had just called out two o'clock when the solitary guest found himself, still giddy from the heavy wine, alone in the great dark hall in front of the mysterious door.

The windows were at only a slight elevation from the street, and a spring would take him to safety should his desire to remain there, or to solve the mystery of the sealed room, vanish. But next morning all the windows in the great hall were found closed, just as the servants had left them the night before. The night watchman reported that he had heard a hollow-sounding crash in that unoccupied part of the house during the night. But that was nothing unusual, as there was a general belief in the neighborhood that the house was haunted.

For hollow noises were often heard there, and sounds as of money falling on the floor, and rattling and clinking as of a factory machine. Enlightened people, it is true, explained these sounds as echoes of the stamping

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and other natural noises from a large stable just behind the old house. But in spite of these explanations and their eminent feasibility, the dread of the unoccupied portion of the house was so great that not even the most reckless man servant could be persuaded to enter it alone after nightfall.

Next morning at eight o'clock Winther appeared at his mother-in-law's door, saying that he had forgotten something of importance in the great hall the night before. Madame Wolff had not yet arisen, but the maid who let in the early visitor noticed with surprise that he had a large pistol sticking out of one of his pockets.

Winther had been to his cousin's apartment and found it locked. He now entered the great hall, and at first glance thought it empty. To his alarm and astonishment, however, he saw that the sealed door had been broken open. He approached it with anxiety, and found his wife's cousin, the doughty duelist, lying pale and lifeless on the threshold. Beside him lay a large stone which had struck his head in falling and must have killed him at once. Over the door was a hole in the wall, just the size of the stone. The latter had evidently rested on the upper edge of the door, and must certainly have fallen on its opening. The unfortunate man lay half in the mysterious chamber and half in the hall, just as he must have fallen when the stone struck him.

The formal investigation of the closed room was made in the presence of the police authorities. It contained nothing but a small safe which was built into the wall. When the safe had been opened by force, an inner chamber, which had to be broken open by itself, was found to contain a number of rolls of gold pieces, many jewels and numerous notes and I. O. U.'s. The treasure was covered by an old document. From this latter it was learned that the owner of the house two hundred years ago had been a silk weaver by the name of Flemming Ambrosius Wolff. He was said to have lent money on security for many years, but had died apparently a poor man, because he had so carefully hidden his riches that little of it was found after his death.

With a niggardliness that bordered on madness, he had believed that he could hide his treasure forever by shutting it up in the sealed room. The curse over the door was to frighten away any venturesome mortal, and further security was given by the clause in the title deed.

The universally disliked Lieutenant Flemming Wolff must have had many characteristics in common with this disagreeable old ancestor, to whose treasure he would have fallen heir had he not lost his life in the discovering of it. The old miser had not hidden his wealth for all eternity, as he had hoped, but had only brought about the inheriting of it by Madame Wolff, the owner of the house, and the next of kin. The first use to which this lady put the money was to tear down the uncanny old building and to erect in its stead a beautiful new home for her daughter and son-in-law.