The Sealed Room

Arthur Conan Doyle

A solicitor of an active habit and athletic tastes who is compelled by his hopes of business to remain within the four walls of his office from ten till five must take what exercise he can in the evenings. Hence it was that I was in the habit of indulging in very long nocturnal excursions, in which I sought the heights of Hampstead and Highgate in order to cleanse my system from the impure air of Abchurch Lane. It was in the course of one of these aimless rambles that I first met Felix Stanniford, and so led up to what has been the most extraordinary adventure of my lifetime.

One evening—it was in April or early May of the year 1894—I made my way to the extreme northern fringe of London, and was walking down one of those fine avenues of high brick villas which the huge city is for ever pushing farther and farther out into the country. It was a fine, clear spring night, the moon was shining out of an unclouded sky, and I, having already left many miles behind me, was inclined to walk slowly and look about me. In this contemplative mood, my attention was arrested by one of the houses which I was passing.

It was a very large building, standing in its own grounds, a little back from the road. It was modern in appearance, and yet it was far less so than its neighbours, all of which were crudely and painfully new. Their symmetrical line was broken by the gap caused by the laurel-studded lawn, with the great, dark, gloomy house looming at the back of it. Evidently it had been the country retreat of some wealthy merchant, built perhaps when the nearest street was a mile off, and now gradually overtaken and surrounded by the red brick tentacles of the London octopus. The next stage, I reflected, would be its digestion and absorption, so that the cheap builder might rear a dozen eighty-pound-a-year villas upon the garden frontage. And then, as all this passed vaguely through my mind, an incident occurred which brought my thoughts into quite another channel.

A four-wheeled cab, that opprobrium of London, was coming jolting and creaking in one direction, while in the other there was a yellow glare from the lamp of a cyclist. They were the only moving objects in the whole long, moonlit road, and yet they crashed into each other with that malignant accuracy which brings two ocean liners together in the broad waste of the Atlantic. It was the cyclist's fault. He tried to cross in front of the cab, miscalculated his distance, and was knocked sprawling by the horse's shoulder. He rose, snarling; the cabman swore back at him, and then, realizing that his number had not yet been taken, lashed his horse and lumbered off. The cyclist caught at the handles of his prostrate machine, and then suddenly sat down with a groan. "Oh, Lord!" he said.

I ran across the road to his side. "Any harm done?" I asked.

“It’s my ankle,” said he. “Only a twist, I think; but it’s pretty painful. Just give me your hand, will you?”

He lay in the yellow circle of the cycle lamp, and I noted as I helped him to his feet that he was a gentlemanly young fellow, with a slight dark moustache and large, brown eyes, sensitive and nervous in appearance, with indications of weak health upon his sunken cheeks. Work or worry had left its traces upon his thin, yellow face. He stood up when I pulled his hand, but he held one foot in the air, and he groaned as he moved it.

“I can’t put it to the ground,” said he.

“Where do you live?”

“Here!” he nodded his head towards the big, dark house in the garden. “I was cutting across to the gate when that confounded cab ran into me. Could you help me so far?”

It was easily done. I put his cycle inside the gate, and then I supported him down the drive, and up the steps to the hall door. There was not a light anywhere, and the place was as black and silent as if no one had ever lived in it.

“That will do. Thank you very much,” said he, fumbling with his key in the lock.

“No, you must allow me to see you safe.”

He made some feeble, petulant protest, and then realized that he could really do nothing without me. The door had opened into a pitch-dark hall. He lurched forward, with my hand still on his arm.

“This door to the right,” said he, feeling about in the darkness.

I opened the door, and at the same moment he managed to strike a light. There was a lamp upon the table, and we lit it between us. “Now, I’m all right. You can leave me now! Good-bye!” said he, and with the words he sat down in the arm-chair and fainted dead away.

It was a queer position for me. The fellow looked so ghastly, that really I was not sure that he was not dead. Presently his lips quivered and his breast heaved, but his eyes were two white slits and his colour was horrible. The responsibility was more than I could stand. I pulled at the bell-rope, and heard the bell ringing furiously far away. But no one came in response. The bell tinkled away into silence, which no murmur or movement came to break. I waited, and rang again, with the same result. There must be some one about. This young gentleman could not live all alone in that huge house. His people ought to know of his

condition. If they would not answer the bell, I must hunt them out myself. I seized the lamp and rushed from the room.

What I saw outside amazed me. The hall was empty. The stairs were bare, and yellow with dust. There were three doors opening into spacious rooms, and each was uncarpeted and undraped, save for the grey webs which drooped from the cornice, and rosettes of lichen which had formed upon the walls. My feet reverberated in those empty and silent chambers. Then I wandered on down the passage, with the idea that the kitchens, at least, might be tenanted. Some caretaker might lurk in some secluded room. No, they were all equally desolate. Despairing of finding any help, I ran down another corridor, and came on something which surprised me more than ever.

The passage ended in a large, brown door, and the door had a seal of red wax the size of a five-shilling piece over the keyhole. This seal gave me the impression of having been there for a long time, for it was dusty and discoloured. I was still staring at it, and wondering what that door might conceal, when I heard a voice calling behind me, and, running back, found my young man sitting up in his chair and very much astonished at finding himself in darkness.

“Why on earth did you take the lamp away?” he asked.

“I was looking for assistance.”

“You might look for some time,” said he. “I am alone in the house.”

“Awkward if you get an illness.”

“It was foolish of me to faint. I inherit a weak heart from my mother, and pain or emotion has that effect upon me. It will carry me off some day, as it did her. You’re not a doctor, are you?”

“No, a lawyer. Frank Alder is my name.”

“Mine is Felix Stanniford. Funny that I should meet a lawyer, for my friend, Mr. Perceval, was saying that we should need one soon.”

“Very happy, I am sure.”

“Well, that will depend upon him, you know. Did you say that you had run with that lamp all over the ground floor?”

“Yes.”

“*All* over it?” he asked, with emphasis, and he looked at me very hard.

“I think so. I kept on hoping that I should find someone.”

“Did you enter *all* the rooms?” he asked, with the same intent gaze.

“Well, all that I could enter.”

“Oh, then you *did* notice it!” said he, and he shrugged his shoulders with the air of a man who makes the best of a bad job.

“Notice what?”

“Why, the door with the seal on it.”

“Yes, I did.”

“Weren’t you curious to know what was in it?”

“Well, it did strike me as unusual.”

“Do you think you could go on living alone in this house, year after year, just longing all the time to know what is at the other side of that door, and yet not looking?”

“Do you mean to say,” I cried, “that you don’t know yourself?”

“No more than you do.”

“Then why don’t you look?”

“I mustn’t,” said he.

He spoke in a constrained way, and I saw that I had blundered on to some delicate ground. I don’t know that I am more inquisitive than my neighbours, but there certainly was something in the situation which appealed very strongly to my curiosity. However, my last excuse for remaining in the house was gone now that my companion had recovered his senses. I rose to go.

“Are you in a hurry?” he asked.

“No; I have nothing to do.”

“Well, I should be very glad if you would stay with me a little. The fact is that I live a very retired and secluded life here. I don’t suppose there is a man in London who leads such a life as I do. It is quite unusual for me to have any one to talk with.”

I looked round at the little room, scantily furnished, with a sofa-bed at one side. Then I thought of the great, bare house, and the sinister door with the discoloured red seal upon it. There was something queer and grotesque in the situation, which made me long to know a little more. Perhaps I should, if I waited. I told him that I should be very happy.

“You will find the spirits and a siphon upon the side table. You must forgive me if I cannot act as host, but I can’t get across the room. Those are cigars in the tray there. I’ll take one myself, I think. And so you are a solicitor, Mr. Alder?”

“Yes.”

“And I am nothing. I am that most helpless of living creatures, the son of a millionaire. I was brought up with the expectation of great wealth; and here I am, a poor man, without any profession at all. And then, on the top of it all, I am left with this great mansion on my hands, which I cannot possibly keep up. Isn’t it an absurd situation? For me to use this as my dwelling is like a coster drawing his barrow with a thoroughbred. A donkey would be more useful to him, and a cottage to me.”

“But why not sell the house?” I asked.

“I mustn’t.”

“Let it, then?”

“No, I mustn’t do that either.”

I looked puzzled, and my companion smiled.

“I’ll tell you how it is, if it won’t bore you,” said he.

“On the contrary, I should be exceedingly interested.”

“I think, after your kind attention to me, I cannot do less than relieve any curiosity that you may feel. You must know that my father was Stanislaus Stanniford, the banker.”

Stanniford, the banker! I remembered the name at once. His flight from the country some seven years before had been one of the scandals and sensations of the time.

“I see that you remember,” said my companion. “My poor father left the country to avoid numerous friends, whose savings he had invested in an unsuccessful speculation. He was a nervous, sensitive man, and the responsibility quite upset his reason. He had committed no legal offence. It was purely a matter of sentiment. He would not even face his own family, and he died among strangers without ever letting us know where he was.”

“He died!” said I.

“We could not prove his death, but we know that it must be so, because the speculations came right again, and so there was no reason why he should not look any man in the face. He would have returned if he were alive. But he must have died in the last two years.”

“Why in the last two years?”

“Because we heard from him two years ago.”

“Did he not tell you then where he was living?”

“The letter came from Paris, but no address was given. It was when my poor mother died. He wrote to me then, with some instructions and some advice, and I have never heard from him since.”

“Had you heard before?”

“Oh, yes, we had heard before, and that’s where our mystery of the sealed door, upon which you stumbled to-night, has its origin. Pass me that desk, if you please. Here I have my father’s letters, and you are the first man except Mr. Perceval who has seen them.”

“Who is Mr. Perceval, may I ask?”

“He was my father’s confidential clerk, and he has continued to be the friend and adviser of my mother and then of myself. I don’t know what we should have done without Perceval. He saw the letters, but no one else. This is the first one, which came on the very day when my father fled, seven years ago. Read it to yourself.”

This is the letter which I read:—

“My Ever Dearest Wife,—

“Since Sir William told me how weak your heart is, and how harmful any shock might be, I have never talked about my business affairs to you. The time has come when at all risks I can no longer refrain from telling you that things have been going badly with me. This will cause me to leave you for a little time, but it is with the absolute assurance that we shall see each other very soon. On this you can thoroughly rely. Our parting is only for a very short time, my own darling, so don’t let it fret you, and above all don’t let it impair your health, for that is what I want above all things to avoid.

“Now, I have a request to make, and I implore you by all that binds us together to fulfil it exactly as I tell you. There are some things which I do not wish to be seen by any one in my dark room—the room which I use for photographic purposes at the end of the garden passage. To prevent any painful thoughts, I may assure you once for all, dear, that it is nothing of which I need be ashamed. But still I do not wish you or Felix to enter that room. It is locked, and I implore you when you receive this to at once place a seal over the lock, and leave it so. Do not sell or let the house, for in either case my secret will be discovered. As long as you or Felix are in the house, I know that you will comply with my wishes. When Felix is twenty-one he may enter the room—not before.

“And now, good-bye, my own best of wives. During our short separation you can consult Mr. Perceval on any matters which may arise. He has my complete confidence. I hate to leave Felix and you—even for a time—but there is really no choice.

“Ever and always your loving husband,

Stanislaus Stanniford.

“June 4th, 1887.”

“These are very private family matters for me to inflict upon you,” said my companion, apologetically. “You must look upon it as done in your professional capacity. I have wanted to speak about it for years.”

“I am honoured by your confidence,” I answered, “and exceedingly interested by the facts.”

“My father was a man who was noted for his almost morbid love of truth. He was always pedantically accurate. When he said, therefore, that he hoped to see my mother very soon, and when he said that he had nothing to be ashamed of in that dark room, you may rely upon it that he meant it.”

“Then what can it be?” I ejaculated.

“Neither my mother nor I could imagine. We carried out his wishes to the letter, and placed the seal upon the door; there it has been ever since. My mother lived for five years after my father’s disappearance, although at the time all the doctors said that she could not survive long. Her heart was terribly diseased. During the first few months she had two letters from my father. Both had the Paris post-mark, but no address. They were short and to the same effect: that they would soon be reunited, and that she should not fret. Then there was a silence, which lasted until her death; and then came a letter to me of so private a nature that I cannot show it to you, begging me never to think evil of him, giving me much good advice, and saying that the sealing of the room was of less importance now than during the lifetime of my mother, but that the opening might still cause pain to others, and that, therefore, he thought it best that it should be postponed until my twenty-first year, for the lapse of time would make things easier. In the meantime, he committed the care of the room to me; so now you can understand how it is that, although I am a very poor man, I can neither let nor sell this great house.”

“You could mortgage it.”

“My father had already done so.”

“It is a most singular state of affairs.”

“My mother and I were gradually compelled to sell the furniture and to dismiss the servants, until now, as you see, I am living unattended in a single room. But I have only two more months.”

“What do you mean?”

“Why, that in two months I come of age. The first thing that I do will be to open that door; the second, to get rid of the house.”

“Why should your father have continued to stay away when these investments had recovered themselves?”

“He must be dead.”

“You say that he had not committed any legal offence when he fled the country?”

“None.”

“Why should he not take your mother with him?”

“I do not know.”

“Why should he conceal his address?”

“I do not know.”

“Why should he allow your mother to die and be buried without coming back?”

“I do not know.”

“My dear sir,” said I, “if I may speak with the frankness of a professional adviser, I should say that it is very clear that your father had the strongest reasons for keeping out of the country, and that, if nothing has been proved against him, he at least thought that something might be, and refused to put himself within the power of the law. Surely that must be obvious, for in what other possible way can the facts be explained?”

My companion did not take my suggestion in good part.

“You had not the advantage of knowing my father, Mr. Alder,” he said, coldly. “I was only a boy when he left us, but I shall always look upon him as my ideal man. His only fault was that he was too sensitive and too unselfish. That any one should lose money through him would cut him to the heart. His sense of honour was most acute, and any theory of his disappearance which conflicts with that is a mistaken one.”

It pleased me to hear the lad speak out so roundly, and yet I knew that the facts were against him, and that he was incapable of taking an unprejudiced view of the situation.

“I only speak as an outsider,” said I. “And now I must leave you, for I have a long walk before me. Your story has interested me so much that I should be glad if you could let me know the sequel.”

“Leave me your card,” said he; and so, having bade him “good-night,” I left him.

I heard nothing more of the matter for some time, and had almost feared that it would prove to be one of those fleeting experiences which drift away from our direct observation and end only in a hope or a suspicion. One afternoon, however, a card bearing the name of Mr. J. H. Perceval was brought up to my office in Abchurch Lane, and its bearer, a small dry, bright-eyed fellow of fifty, was ushered in by the clerk.

“I believe, sir,” said he, “that my name has been mentioned to you by my young friend, Mr. Felix Stanniford?”

“Of course,” I answered, “I remember.”

“He spoke to you, I understand, about the circumstances in connection with the disappearance of my former employer, Mr. Stanislaus Stanniford, and the existence of a sealed room in his former residence.”

“He did.”

“And you expressed an interest in the matter.”

“It interested me extremely.”

“You are aware that we hold Mr. Stanniford’s permission to open the door on the twenty-first birthday of his son?”

“I remember.”

“The twenty-first birthday is to-day.”

“Have you opened it?” I asked, eagerly.

“Not yet, sir,” said he, gravely. “I have reason to believe that it would be well to have witnesses present when that door is opened. You are a lawyer, and you are acquainted with the facts. Will you be present on the occasion?”

“Most certainly.”

“You are employed during the day, and so am I. Shall we meet at nine o’clock at the house?”

“I will come with pleasure.”

“Then you will find us waiting for you. Good-bye, for the present.” He bowed solemnly, and took his leave.

I kept my appointment that evening, with a brain which was weary with fruitless attempts to think out some plausible explanation of the mystery which we were about to solve. Mr. Perceval and my young acquaintance were waiting for me in the little room. I was not surprised to see the young man looking pale and nervous, but I was rather astonished to find the dry little City man in a state of intense, though partially suppressed, excitement. His cheeks were flushed, his hands twitching, and he could not stand still for an instant.

Stanniford greeted me warmly, and thanked me many times for having come. “And now, Perceval,” said he to his companion, “I suppose there is no obstacle to our putting the thing through without delay? I shall be glad to get it over.”

The banker’s clerk took up the lamp and led the way. But he paused in the passage outside the door, and his hand was shaking, so that the light flickered up and down the high, bare walls.

“Mr. Stanniford,” said he, in a cracking voice, “I hope you will prepare yourself in case any shock should be awaiting you when that seal is removed and the door is opened.”

“What could there be, Perceval? You are trying to frighten me.”

“No, Mr. Stanniford; but I should wish you to be ready ... to be braced up ... not to allow yourself....” He had to lick his dry lips between every jerky sentence, and I suddenly realized, as clearly as if he had told me, that he knew what was behind that closed door, and that it *was* something terrible. “Here are the keys, Mr. Stanniford, but remember my warning!”

He had a bunch of assorted keys in his hand, and the young man snatched them from him. Then he thrust a knife under the discoloured red seal and jerked it off. The lamp was rattling and shaking in Perceval’s hands, so I took it from him and held it near the key hole, while Stanniford tried key after key. At last one turned in the lock, the door flew open, he took one step into the room, and then, with a horrible cry, the young man fell senseless at our feet.

If I had not given heed to the clerk’s warning, and braced myself for a shock, I should certainly have dropped the lamp. The room, windowless and bare, was fitted up as a photographic laboratory, with a tap and sink at the side of it. A shelf of bottles and measures stood at one side, and a peculiar, heavy smell, partly chemical, partly animal, filled the air. A single table and chair were in front of us, and at this, with his back turned towards us, a man was seated in the act of writing. His outline and attitude were as natural as life; but as the light fell upon him, it made my hair rise to see that the nape of his neck was black and wrinkled, and no thicker than my wrist. Dust lay upon him—thick, yellow dust—upon his hair, his shoulders, his shrivelled, lemon-coloured hands. His head had fallen forward upon his breast. His pen still rested upon a discoloured sheet of paper.

“My poor master! My poor, poor master!” cried the clerk, and the tears were running down his cheeks.

“What!” I cried, “Mr. Stanislaus Stanniford!”

“Here he has sat for seven years. Oh, why would he do it? I begged him, I implored him, I went on my knees to him, but he would have his way. You see the key on the table. He had locked the door upon the inside. And he has written something. We must take it.”

“Yes, yes, take it, and for God’s sake, let us get out of this,” I cried; “the air is poisonous. Come, Stanniford, come!” Taking an arm each, we half led and half carried the terrified man back to his own room.

“It was my father!” he cried, as he recovered his consciousness. “He is sitting there dead in his chair. You knew it, Perceval! This was what you meant when you warned me.”

“Yes, I knew it, Mr. Stanniford. I have acted for the best all along, but my position has been a terribly difficult one. For seven years I have known that your father was dead in that room.”

“You knew it, and never told us!”

“Don’t be harsh with me, Mr. Stanniford, sir! Make allowance for a man who has had a hard part to play.”

“My head is swimming round. I cannot grasp it!” He staggered up, and helped himself from the brandy bottle. “These letters to my mother and to myself—were they forgeries?”

“No, sir; your father wrote them and addressed them, and left them in my keeping to be posted. I have followed his instructions to the very letter in all things. He was my master, and I have obeyed him.”

The brandy had steadied the young man’s shaken nerves. “Tell me about it. I can stand it now,” said he.

“Well, Mr. Stanniford, you know that at one time there came a period of great trouble upon your father, and he thought that many poor people were about to lose their savings through his fault. He was a man who was so tender-hearted that he could not bear the thought. It worried him and tormented him, until he determined to end his life. Oh, Mr. Stanniford, if you knew how I have prayed him and wrestled with him over it, you would never blame me! And he in turn prayed me as no man has ever prayed me before. He had made up his mind, and he would do it in any case, he said; but it rested with me whether his death should be happy and easy or whether it should be most miserable. I read in his eyes that he meant what he said. And at last I yielded to his prayers, and I consented to do his will.

“What was troubling him was this. He had been told by the first doctor in London that his

wife's heart would fail at the slightest shock. He had a horror of accelerating her end, and yet his own existence had become unendurable to him. How could he end himself without injuring her?

"You know now the course that he took. He wrote the letter which she received. There was nothing in it which was not literally true. When he spoke of seeing her again so soon, he was referring to her own approaching death, which he had been assured could not be delayed more than a very few months. So convinced was he of this, that he only left two letters to be forwarded at intervals after his death. She lived five years, and I had no letters to send.

"He left another letter with me to be sent to you, sir, upon the occasion of the death of your mother. I posted all these in Paris to sustain the idea of his being abroad. It was his wish that I should say nothing, and I have said nothing. I have been a faithful servant. Seven years after his death, he thought no doubt that the shock to the feelings of his surviving friends would be lessened. He was always considerate for others."

There was silence for some time. It was broken by young Stanniford.

"I cannot blame you, Perceval. You have spared my mother a shock, which would certainly have broken her heart. What is that paper?"

"It is what your father was writing, sir. Shall I read it to you?"

"Do so."

"'I have taken the poison, and I feel it working in my veins. It is strange, but not painful. When these words are read I shall, if my wishes have been faithfully carried out, have been dead many years. Surely no one who has lost money through me will still bear me animosity. And you, Felix, you will forgive me this family scandal. May God find rest for a sorely wearied spirit!'"

"Amen!" we cried, all three.