THE CASE OF THE SIX WATSONS: No. 7.

THE LOCKED ROOM

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THE LOCKED ROOM

A widower doctor of active habits with a busy practice 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 from my rooms in Mortimer Street, up towards Regent's Park and, on occasion, to Baker Street itself. This was during those years when my friend was missing, thought dead, and that street and our old address always brought on an attack of melancholia. So, where possible, to preserve my sanity, I stayed to the east of the park.

It was in the course of one of these rambles that I first met Felix Stanniford, and so embarked upon what has been the most extraordinary adventure of those lost years which many now call The Great Hiatus.

One evening - it was early in 1894 - I made my way to the outer ring and walked towards the zoo, with the splendid Nash terraces on my right. It was a fine, clear night, the moon was shining out of an unclouded sky, and I was inclined to walk slowly and look about me. In this contemplative mood I began to think back on the years I had spent with Holmes and the short time I had been allowed with my wife, Mary, when 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, realising 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 loud groan. "Oh, Lord!" he said.

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

"It's my ankle," he said.

I knelt down and quickly examined it. "Only a twist, I think. But it'll be very painful I should think. Give me your hand."

"You're a doctor?"

"Dr John Watson, at your service."

"Felix Stanniford. I am much obliged for you coming to my aid."

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, sallow face. He stood up when I pulled his hand, but he held one foot in the air, and he gasped as he moved it.

"I can't put it to the ground," said he. “Perhaps it is broken.”

I suspected not. Nor was the Achilles tendon affected. There was the possibility of a fracture, however.

"Where do you live?" I asked.

"Here." He nodded his head towards one of the lovely white terraces. "I was cutting across to the gate when that confounded cab ran into me. Could you help me that far?"

It was easily done. I put his bicycle inside the gate, and then I supported him down the short 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," he said, fumbling with his key in the lock.

"No, you must allow me to see you safe."

He made some feeble, petulant protest, and then realised that he could really do nothing without

me. The door had opened into a pitch-black 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, Dr Watson." And with those words he sat down in the armchair and fainted dead away.

I quickly ascertained that he was not dead, that this was merely a swoon. Presently his lips quivered and his chest heaved, but his eyes were two white slits and his colour was horrible. I thought brandy might help, but there was no obvious drinks cabinet in the room.

I pulled at the bell-rope, and heard a furious ringing 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 someone 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 white 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.

How, I thought, in the middle of the greatest city in the world, could a house this grand be allowed to fall into such a state of disrepair and neglect?

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 that 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 quite alone in the house."

"Awkward if you get an illness."

"It was foolish of me to faint. I inherited 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."

"I can recommend some of the best heart men in Harley Street," I said truthfully.

"My mother tried them all. They all say the same thing. Nature will take its course. 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."

"Of course I did."

"Weren't you curious to know what was in it?"

I considered my answer. My curiosity was not as keen as it had been in the days when Holmes

was part of my life. "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?"

"I doubt it," I replied. "But do you mean to say 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 the next man, unless that man is Sherlock Holmes, but it did seem a rum state of affairs. I fetched a stool and laid his injured leg on it, then undid the boot and then removed his sock. I pressed the flesh around the ankle as gently as I could and he winced. "I would like to strap it up. Have you bandages in the house?"

"Not that I know of," he laughed.

"Have you a linen cupboard?'

"On the landing upstairs."

I lit a second lamp and passed out into the hall once more. The stairwell was deep in shadow and, for a moment, my eyes played tricks on me, for I thought I could see something lurking in the darkest hollows. As soon as I moved, however, the pale light from the lamp revealed

nothing but carvings and crannies.

There was a smell, too, or rather smells — of mould, decay, damp with undertones of some pungent chemical I knew I could not identify. Oh for Holmes at such a time!

I felt a deep discomfort at being at large alone in that ruined mansion, a sensation which remained with me until I had fetched a cotton sheet and returned to Stanniford.

Using my teeth to start the tear, I ripped several strips of makeshift bandages. “We had to do this in Afghanistan,” I said. “Never enough bandages. Yet we officers had beds with sheets on them - although not for long once the wounded arrived.” I quickly bound the ankle and part of his foot. “There. How does it feel?”

“Better. Thank you.”

“Well, you still can’t put any weight on it. Shall I make up the sofa bed?”

"Are you in a hurry? " he asked.

"No,” I said with some reticence. “I have nothing to do. Although my first patient is at eight."

"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 anyone to talk with."

"HERE I HAVE MY FATHER'S LETTERS."

I looked round at the little room, scantily furnished, with the sofa-bed I had noticed 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. Oh, no doubt Holmes could have rattled off a dozen possible explanations within the course of a single pipe, but I was no Sherlock Holmes. Perhaps I should, if I waited, be able to solve the mystery. I told him that I should be very happy to linger.

"You will find the spirits and a siphon in that writing bureau over there. It is what passes for a drinks cabinet here. There are cigars in a tray in there, too. I'll take one myself, I think, Dr Watson. I cannot believe my luck, to be knocked off a bicycle and be rescued by a medical man. "

"Hardly rescued. Assisted might be closer to the truth."

"You are a doctor," he went on. "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, to top 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 new companion smiled.

"I'll tell you how it is, if it won't bore you," he said.

"On the contrary," I assured him. "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. Some of his creditors had even beat a path to Baker Street, imploring Holmes to track the scoundrel down. Holmes had replied that he was a detective, not a manhunter, nor a debt collector.

"I see that you remember," said young Stanniford. "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? I never heard that," I admitted.

"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 leather folder, 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 fulfill 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 and 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, goodbye, my own best of wives. During our 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. April 4th, 1892.

"These are very private family matters for me to inflict upon you," said the son, apologetically. "But I have wanted to speak about it for years. And.. well, Dr Watson, I know you are a honourable man."

"I am flattered by your confidence," I answered, "and exceedingly interested by the facts. But what makes you think I deserve your trust?"

“The man who wrote the Sherlock Holmes stories has a keen sense of morality and an

understanding of the foibles of human nature. I warm to him. I believe you are that man, although I did not, I confess, put two and two together at first and realise I had such an illustrious saviour.”

I inclined my head to acknowledge the compliments but said no more. It would sound like false modesty to argue that I was but a conduit for a great man, a man now lost to London and the world.

"My father 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 asked. “What could be in the locked and sealed room?”

"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 would not survive long. Her heart was terribly diseased. During the first few months she had two letters from my father. Both had the Paris postmark, 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 the year of my twenty-first birthday, 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," I admitted.

"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 four more months."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, that in four 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. It was a poor investment, not fraud."

"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 sir," I said, "if I may speak with the frankness of a man who was once associate and friend to the finest detective who has ever lived, 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 of guilt in some way in good part.

"You had not the advantage of knowing my father, Dr Watson," 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 anyone 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," I said. "And now I must leave you, for I have a decent walk home 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, Dr Watson."

I handed it over and he examined it, tilting it into the lamplight. ‘Mortimer Street? Not Baker Street?’

“I am afraid there are too many memories, both good and bad, in those rooms. Mostly good. Which makes it harder to bear. Mortimer Street is where you can reach me.”

And so, having bade him goodnight, I left.

I heard nothing more of the matter for some time, and had dismissed it as one of those fleeting experiences which drift away from our direct observation and end only in a hope or a suspicion. Besides, it was swept away from my concerns by the return of Sherlock Holmes, in a

most dramatic manner. I consented to move back to Baker Street and the second phase of our eventful life together commenced, although I did keep up my practice at Mortimer Street.

"'I BELIEVE, SIR,' SAID HE, 'THAT MY NAME HAS BEEN MENTIONED TO YOU?'"

One afternoon there, while I was writing up what would become known as The Adventure of the Empty House, however, a card bearing the name of Mr. J. H. Perceval was brought up to my rooms and its bearer, a small, dry, bright-eyed fellow of fifty, was ushered in by my clerk.

"I believe, sir," he said, " 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 today."

"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 doctor of some standing, and you are acquainted with the facts. You have seen some queer things in your time with Mr. Holmes. Will you be present on the occasion?"

"Most certainly. Do I have time to fetch Holmes?”

"My instructions are to ask for you alone, sir. And to come within the hour. But I am certain Mr Holmes will not be turned away."

"Then I will come with pleasure."

"You will find us waiting for you. Goodbye, for the present." He bowed solemnly, and took

his leave.

In the end, I did not trouble Holmes. He had been returned to me in good health, but his constitution was not what it had been. He tired more easily. I had suggested a break from London, but he had dismissed this. Even so, I had determined not to place too many burdens on his shoulders until he had taken a holiday of some description.

I kept my appointment at the old house, with a brain that was weary with fruitless attempts to think out some plausible explanation of the mystery that 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. He also expressed delight that Holmes had been returned to me, alive and well.

"And now, Perceval," he said to his confidante, "I suppose there is no obstacle to our putting the thing through without delay? I shall be glad to get it over."

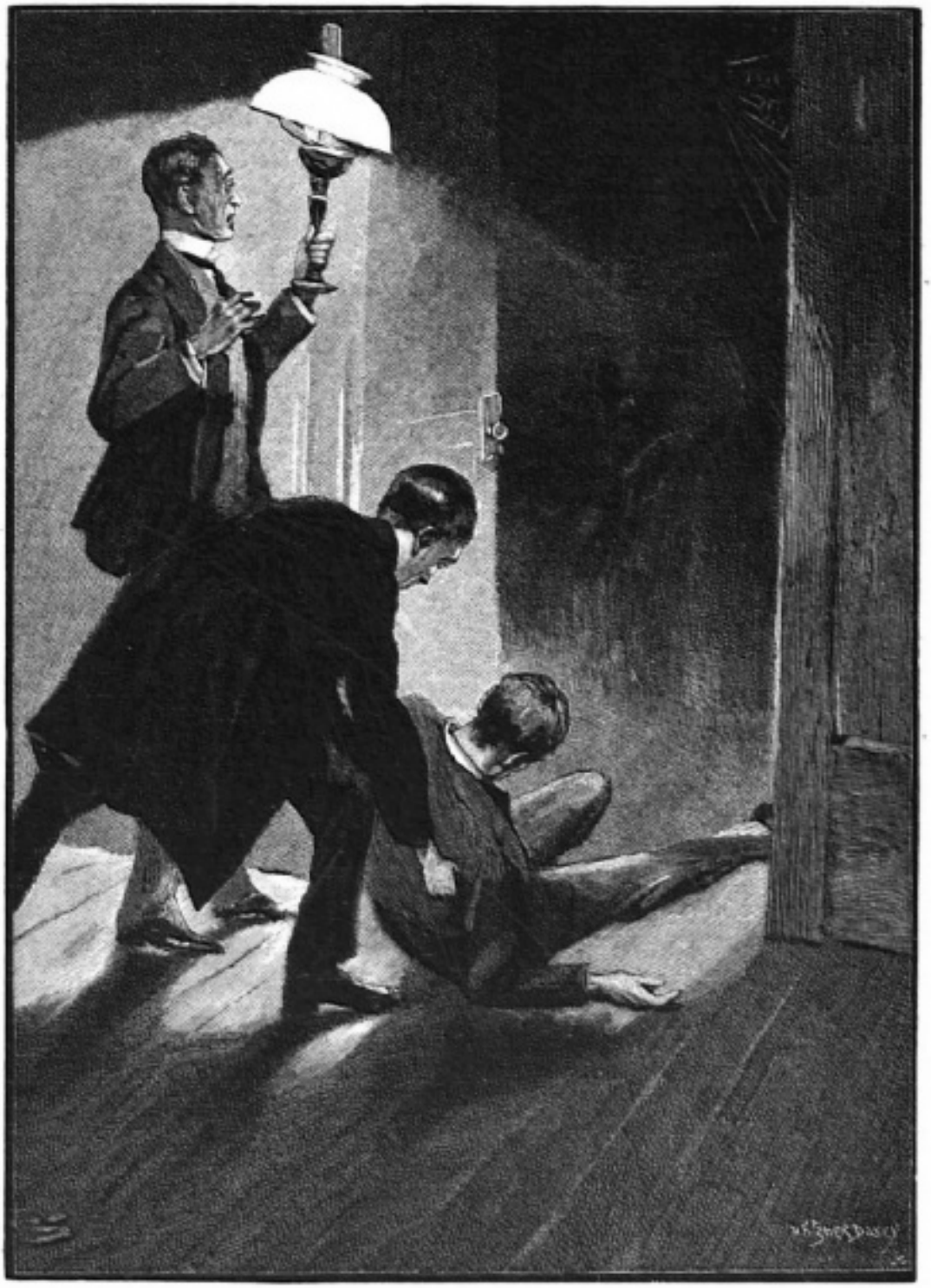
The banker's clerk took up the lamp and led the

way. But he paused in the passage outside the door. His hand was shaking, so that the light flickered up and down the high, bare walls.

"Mr. Stanniford," he said, 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 realised, 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!"



"WITH A HORRIBLE CRY, THE YOUNG MAN FELL SENSELESS AT OUR FEET."

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 keyhole, 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 — a thick, gray 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 alcohol 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. I wrestled with him over it but 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 finest doctors 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 that 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 more 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 spared my mother a shock, which would certainly

have broken her heart. What is that paper?"

"It is what your father was writing, sir."

Such was the poor man's state, I offered to read it aloud.

"Please, Dr Watson," said Stanniford, "we would both be very grateful."

I cleared my throat and read the short passage. "'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!'"

There was a long silence before Perceval muttered: "Amen."

I left the house that evening bemused by the complexities of the human mind and soul, and the lengths a man might go to when trying to protect his loved ones.

When I returned to Baker Street, and before I could tell my story in full, Holmes announced that he agreed with me, that his constitution was suffering and that a trip to the West Country was an admirable suggestion. Before long the case of the Devil's Foot had driven the singular affair at Regent's Park out of my mind.

It was with great sadness, however, that some five years later, a note from Mr. Perceval informed me that Felix Stanniford had died at his new home in the South of France. His heart, as he had predicted, had given out. Subsequently, I often wondered if the strain of those years living in penury, in a haunted house, friendless, and with only that hideous sealed room for company, had hastened his end. Certainly, it would not have helped his heart condition. Surely his father had not meant to but, even from beyond the grave, the older Stanniford, by his strange machinations, had ended his son’s life all too prematurely.