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THE HIDDEN ROOM—OR, THE MYSTERY OF AN OLD ENGLISH COUNTRY-HOUSE.

"So you want me to give you that story about why father gave up his house in the South of England so soon after he got it," said Fred Hamilton, as he sat in the midst of an eagerly attentive circle. "Well, I'll tell you all about it, if you like; only, don't blame me if you have bad dreams after it, for it's not at all the sort of story to tell just before going to bed. I can promise you that I didn't sleep soundly all night for more than a month after the thing happened; no more would you, if you had seen what I saw. However, if you will have the story, here goes;

"When we first came over from America, we lived at a hotel in London for a bit, while father was looking out for a house down in Kent; for that was where mother wanted to go, because she was born there herself. It wasn't long before we found the very thing we wanted—a great, huge, old-fashioned house, right in the middle of a big garden, and as quiet as ever it could be, for there was no other house near it, and the nearest railway was three or four miles off.

"We got it cheap, too, for it hadn't been let for over so long, and the owner was very glad to get a tenant for it at last. Curiously, it never occurred to any of us to ask why they had not been able to let it; but we remembered it afterward, and with good reason, as you shall hear.

"When we went down stairs there, we thought it rather dismal just at first; and so indeed it was, the trees grew so high and thick all round it, and it had such a lot of dark passages and secret stairs, and grim old oak-paneled chambers in which nobody seemed to have slept for years.

"But after a while we got used to all that, and liked it very well; and father—who had plenty of friends in London—used to have so many people down to stay with him that the house, big as it was, could scarcely hold them all. So father thought he'd build some more rooms at the back, and sent for an architect from London to help him.

"Down comes the architect, goes all over the house, examines it, measures it, and then comes to father with a queer sort of smile, and says:

"Well, sir, you must be very hospitable to think of building more rooms to your house, when you've got one in it already that has never been used at all."

"What on earth do you mean?" says father, staring at him. "Every room in my house is in use now."

"I beg your pardon," says the architect; "I've measured this house very carefully, and I'll pledge you my professional reputation that there is a certain amount of space still unaccounted for, and that there must be in it somewhere a room which you have never yet seen."

"Now, this man was one of the best architects in England, and when father heard him talk like that, it set him thinking.

"Do you really mean that?" says he.

"I do," says the architect; "and what is more, I believe I could point you out the exact spot where the hidden room is to be found; and if my guess is right, we shall find a room which has not been opened or seen within the memory of living man—possibly not for two or three hundred years."

"Well, that woke up father in earnest, as you may think; and all the people who were staying in the house were every bit as excited as himself. By this time we boys had found out what was going on, and had come down from up stairs to see what they were going to do about it; so when the architect went back into the house (for he'd had his talk with father out in the garden,) he had a regular Fourth of July procession at his heels.

"Up he went to the head of the great staircase, turned off along a narrow passage to the right, and stopped half way down it, with us all watching him as if we were looking on at a conjuring trick.

"Now," says he, tapping the wall with his knuckles. "pick a hole in that wall just there, and if you don't find the hidden room behind it, I'm willing to pay all the expenses of the search."

"Send up a couple of men with pick-axes and crow-bars," says father. "This affair's getting interesting, and we'll see it through."

"Up came the men, and to work they went, making the plaster fly in fine style; and it wasn't long before they'd beaten a hole in the wall large enough for a man to creep through."

"Inside, all was dark as pitch, and there came out a damp, chill, buried kind of smell, as bad as any church-vault. We all looked at each other, but nobody seemed inclined to go in.

"Light me a lamp somebody!" cried the architect. "It was I who discovered this place, so it's only fair that I should be the first to enter it."

"In he went, and we all held our breath as we looked after him. But he had scarcely got inside when we heard him give a kind of gasp, and next moment he came scrambling and tumbling out again, almost letting fall the lamp in his hurry. He was a big, strong man, but we could see him tremble like a leaf, and his face was pale as death.

"There's something wrong here!" cries father, snatching the lamp from his hand; and in he went in his turn, the rest of us crowding in after him without knowing why. And there we did see a sight, and no mistake!

"It was a room of the old English style, just like one of those places in Walter Scott—all oak and tapestry, with a splendid fire-place of carved stone, higher than a man's head. But the oak was all decayed and worm-eaten, and the rich hangings were faded and mildewed, and the fire-place full of white ashes. On the table were fine gold dishes and gold goblets, as if a grand feast had been set out there; but both they and the table, and the high-backed chairs round it, were thick with dust, as if nobody had touched them for centuries.

"But the sight was in the farther corner, where there stood a kind of couch, and a skeleton lying upon it, with its hands clasped over where its face had been; and on the floor beside the couch lay another skeleton, doubled up in a gruesome kind of way, as if it had died in awful agony.