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THE CASE OF THE RUSTED ROOM

John Donavan

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NEW YORK, N. Y.

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The Case of the Rusted Room

CHAPTER I

SION HOUSE COMES TO KENSINGTON GORE

In the single-minded belief that this day and age require self-contained apartments suitable for self-contained minds, the projectors of Sion House made little use of psychological subtleties when they set to work. Their interpretation of the national character found expression in the design of a building in which every resident should have his own front door and a window that overlooked the Park, and should enjoy the isolated yet carefully tended luxury of a bee's grub in its cell.

So the housebreakers came, and Kensington Gore reverberated to the crash of falling masonry. Where Lady Blessington d'Orsay had taken tea, horny-handed navvies moved in their mysterious courses; pavements that had known the touch of Nelson's feet, and had enjoyed the peace of a leisured, leisurely age, were rent in twain to admit a writhing mass of pipes and cables; the houses where bucks had exchanged venomous insults beneath a veneer of cultured elegance became the stamping-grounds of sane but unimaginative men who sought constantly for the results of the latest race, whilst condemning the quality of their beer, the works of the Government, and the vagaries of the weather, with rigid impartiality yet perfect unanimity.

And out of this Sion House grew. From a gaunt and shameless steel skeleton it became dressed in bricks and

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mortar. Cunning architects and clever gadget-makers combined to reshape the fundamentals of a vanished world to the tastes of the times. When at last the building was complete, it flaunted a red-brick vastness and an aggressive austerity that startled the quiet Victorian dreams of Kensington.

But Peter Pan was not far from it; his spirit walked the centrally heated corridors, and on its heels trod others—those emotional spirits of humanity which never change. The odd things that are reputed to have come from Pandora's box were in no way disconcerted by this twentieth-century magnificence, in which externals are chromium-plated and ozonized air comes from a box. In the dim recesses of their own souls, the inhabitants of Sion House heard the voices of the same gods that have talked to the darker side of men since Cain looked at his hands and saw that they were strangely dyed.

All London came to look at Sion House because it was worth examining. Publicity had impressed upon the world its modernity, its excellence, its unique qualities. Architectural journals had gone into ecstasies over it, publishing detailed plans alongside exhaustive articles that talked of stress and strain, of sound-absorbing walls, of service lifts and automatic rubbish chutes, of refrigeration, and of the superiority over the crude efforts of Nature of mechanically supplied air that was scrubbed, humidified, and warmed.

Roughly speaking, the building was long and shallow—a plan that had the dual advantages of providing a fine frontage while necessitating only the purchase of properties on the main road. The depth being slight, there was no encroachment on the land behind.

It reached upwards to a height of seven storeys and downwards for a depth of two basements. Below the

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ground, on the second basement, there was a maze of plant; here Sion House manufactured its own atmosphere; a battery of boilers supplied heat and hot water; a huge central vacuum-cleaning plant drew dust and dirt from the farthest corners of the building. Above, on the basement proper, were the kitchens and staff quarters.

Cars came under a covered way to the main entrance; and here the visitor stepped into a miniature town containing the restaurant, the rest rooms, a library, and a row of shops that supplied permanent waves, flowers, confectionery, tobacco, chemists' goods, and theatre tickets—everything, in fact, but the basic essentials of life, which were catered for by the restaurant at prices appropriate to so select a centre.

On the ground floor, too, were modest apartments containing a bed-sitting-room and bath. These were the "minimum" flats that formed the base of a scale rising to the greater magnificence of the top floor, from the windows of which a view right across the Park to Marble Arch was commanded.

Every flat on the top floor consisted of a large bed-sitting-room with ample, steel-framed windows longer than they were high, a lobby, and an internal bath-room. It was a stroke of luck for the proprietors that the latest building regulations of the London County Council were cast to permit bath-rooms without windows, for they could use every inch of their frontage and give every living-room its vaunted view. Thus each flat was shaped like an elongated rectangle.

There came to Sion House the usual miscellany of human beings that such a building attracts; and, as frequently happens under crowded communal conditions, they quickly resolved themselves into cliques and cabals. Such

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a group occupied the four flats at the right-hand end of the top floor, where four beings called these boxes "home."

Never were sound-proof walls more completely justified than in the first of these, which faced the west-wing lift. Here dwelt Brigadier-General Roland Railton-Railton, who believed in expressing his opinions firmly, loudly, and, if possible, objectionably. His body was large and red, and the shortness of his temper contrasted with the length of his years. His services to King and Empire were revealed in an amazing litter of trophies and souvenirs, which crowded the flat with tangible memories of the North-West Frontier and the military operations of nearly half a century; but even these were subordinated to the large arm-chair, the Indian-lacquer table and its tantalus, which stood in front of the window. From this vantage-point, the General passed the greater part of his days in grumbling peace, enlivened every few hours by a pleasant and bracing skirmish with the valet who brought his meals from the service kitchen. Only occasionally did the General go abroad, either to make an energetic sortie on the Park, or to spend an hour or two in a contemplative game of chess with his next-door neighbour—a combination that illustrated the laws of contrast.

This next-door flat itself was neat almost to the point of insult. Down to the smallest match-box, everything was geometrically and exactly placed, as though the articles were distributed according to some mathematical law of proportion. The occupant of the apartment went to his City office in the morning and returned in the middle of the afternoon. From 3.40 onwards, he ruminated happily among highly technical works on chemical engineering. Charles Nimmo was a precise and gentle little man. The ordered rules by which he regulated his days were reflected

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in his daily life and in his chairmanship of Charles Nimmo, Ltd., makers of chemical apparatus and plant. His opinions —in fact his entire existence—were negative; but he could, most decidedly, play chess, and there was a subtle charm in his unfailing courtesy that offset his finicky habits.

Contrast was again supplied by his neighbour on the far side from the General—Miss Prillkins. Aggressive as the General, of whom she disapproved severely, she was massive, solid, and vigorous. Possessing a virile athleticism of her own, she had no patience with people of a lesser build and more sedentary habits. Her entire existence was devoted to works that she decreed good—in particular the bullying of a troop of Girl Guides whereof she was the proud, dictatorial—and, for all that, a most efficient—commandant. She worshipped wholeheartedly at the shrines of fresh air and of that meatiness of physical endeavour and clear-cut, unsubtle thought she swore was England.

The last flat of all belonged to Samuel Wiseman, a gentleman of substance, whose only connection with his three neighbours was a willingness to make a fourth at bridge, which took place perhaps twice a week, and proved, by gathering together these antithetic characters, that there is something in the League of Nations ideal after all.

Wiseman's flat lay midway between the flamboyance of the General's and the preciseness of Charles Nimmo's. It was contrasted, too, with Miss Prillkins's, for Wiseman shared none of that lady's enthusiasm for fresh air. He looked on an open window as a short cut to swift eternity. His sole reason for choosing a flat that was too humble for him lay in its possessing a ventilation system he considered beneficial to his asthma.

As much as anything, the man was a hypochondriac. There was no doubt about the genuineness of his com-

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plaint, which did, beyond all question, cause him severe distress; but it was also his hobby, his fetish, and his sole interest in life, something that he nurtured and tended as another man might cultivate orchids.

All day long, he would sit before the tightly closed windows reading serious books in the intervals between the paroxysms of coughing that racked him. This thin, spare, prematurely grey, man was a firm believer in doctors and patent medicines, in both of which his ample means permitted unfettered indulgence. Let a new doctor be rumoured as an expert in asthmatic diseases and he was immediately summoned to Wiseman. Let a manufacturer announce some new and doubtful inhalant, and Wiseman was his first and most eager customer. He had reduced the judgment of inhalants to a fine art controlled by a simple formula: the more unpleasant the smell of his medicine, the more he believed in it.

Not unnaturally, his neighbours sometimes objected; even the modern devices of Sion House were unable to cope with the mephitic clouds he created. Every time the valet opened the door to serve a meal, the powerful odour of Wiseman's latest fad was wafted along the corridor, and no man or woman appreciates the perfume of adrenalin in concentrated form.

Death was never far from Samuel Wiseman. Every one of those fearful bouts of coughing sapped his energy and overstrained a heart that violent medicines did nothing to strengthen. He sat there in his reeking atmosphere waiting its coming, a wasted life wasting to its end. Circumstance might have given him wealth and ease; it had given him, too, a crabbed and crabbing nature. He saw no good in any of his fellow men. He knew only the torture of his malady and the loneliness to which it condemned him.

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Yet he did not want to die; he clung to the empty husk that was his life as though it were some precious fruit. His grim hold on life was due not so much to his enjoyment of existence as to a desire to benefit no one. When he died, his wealth would fall into other hands, and the idea appalled him. For as long as possible, he was determined, he alone must direct its disposition.

If there was something almost repulsive in Wiseman's attitude to life, there was, too, something pathetic in it. Life had played him a sorry trick; his one desire was to pay as much back as he could before the final curtain fell.

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CHAPTER II

MR. WISEMAN SEES A CALLER

INTRUSIVE strangers had little chance of breaking the cloistered calm enjoyed by the inhabitants of Sion House. Visitors were received in the main hall by the porter on duty and they were not allowed out of his sight, or one of his assistant's, until the tenant had indicated a willingness to see the caller, who was then either taken up to the flat or shown into one of the rest rooms on the ground floor. Sion House was a black area as far as insurance canvassers and enterprising gentlemen with vacuum cleaners were concerned.

When Hugh Chandler called to see Samuel Wiseman, that irascible gentleman requested that the caller should be taken into one of the small rest rooms. He did not like visitors of any description and rarely admitted them to his flat—an idiosyncrasy of his that met with general approval, since few could endure that fume-sodden atmosphere. In any event, he did not relish calls from this particular young man.

Hugh Chandler was the ward and nephew of Wiseman's late cousin, Joshua Wright. Wiseman had little use for the man, whose visits usually meant a request for money—requests that were, without exception, firmly and often rudely refused. Wiseman was feeling particularly ungracious today. He had had an exceptionally bad night, and

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the hangover of the vicious attack was still with him. Yet he was not unwilling for the interview; he almost welcomed an opportunity to be offensive to someone and thus restore his belief in his own power.

As he entered the small rest room, breathing stertorously and leaning heavily on the stout stick he always carried, he glanced with disfavour at his visitor. He had never liked Hugh Chandler, and this afternoon the weak yet not unattractive face seemed particularly distasteful to him. His eyes travelled over the figure in an embracing glance, noting the neutral-coloured hair, the full-lipped mouth and rounded chin revealing a lack of determination, and the slip-shod, untidy, unbrushed suit. He particularly looked at the young man's hands, which experience told him always betrayed his frame of mind. They were restlessly active, the fingers clasping and unclasping; he knew at once that Chandler had come again on the usual business. Wiseman braced himself for the duel.

"Well?" he gasped, wheezing heavily.

"Good afternoon, Uncle." Chandler's voice was unsteady. He always called Wiseman "Uncle," though there was no kinship between them. He had been old Joshua Wright's sister's child, while Wiseman had been Wright's cousin in the maternal line. The "Uncle" was a relic of childhood. "How are you today?"

"Bad as usual. But not bad enough to please you, young man. There's life in the old dog yet, and I'm not giving in for some time to come. You're not to get any high hopes yet."

Chandler flushed. Obviously, Wiseman was in no conciliatory mood. But the flush was caused not so much by the offensive tone as by the fact that the remark was aimed at a raw spot. When Wright had died, he had disposed of his

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estate in what had seemed to Chandler as a cruel injustice. The residuary sum of over fifty thousand pounds had been left in trust, with life interest to Wiseman, who was already a rich man, while Chandler, whom Wright had brought up as his own son, had been left only one hundred and fifty pounds a year, though the reversion came to him at Wiseman's death. With that grimness so typical of him, Wiseman had interpreted the terms of the will literally. Chandler got his income, but no more. He argued that Wright's intention had been for Chandler to make his own way in the world, while protecting him from absolute penury, and that to give any further aid was to defeat the ends of the testator.

Chandler looked at Wiseman in silence, trying to make up his mind how to continue. He always rehearsed his interviews beforehand, but when the time came, his weakness invariably let him down. He never proceeded on the lines he had thought out as the best; as a result, he failed when greater resolution, a firmer determination to press his own cause, might conceivably have brought him success.

"I came to you, Uncle," he said at last, slowly, "to discuss a business matter with you."

Wiseman grunted.

"That's what I expected. Well, Joshua made me your trustee, so I suppose I must talk to you. But we've had these talks before, and you know that you and I rarely see eye to eye. Still, get on with it."

"It's about my process. I've been working night and day on it, and it's coming on beautifully. I've got to the stage when I must build a full-size model to try out the results of the experimental plant under proper working conditions, and I wanted to ask you whether the estate could let me have, say, four or five thousand pounds——"

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Wiseman banged his hand down on the arm of his chair.

"It's always the same, Hugh. You never come to see me until you want something, though I'm a sick man. And it's always this invention of yours. What do I care about it? What does it mean to me? Your Uncle Joshua made his will, and he knew what he was doing. He wanted to make sure the money he'd saved and made through his own efforts shouldn't be wasted through your crazy ideas. He knew you well, young man. Yet you come here, time after time, and ask me for this, that, or the other. I tell you, as I've told you before, I'm not going behind the terms of the will. I do my duty as it's laid down, and there's nothing else I will do."

"But, Uncle, this is life and death to me. Really it is. After all, Uncle Joshua wanted me to stand on my own feet, and I'm trying to do so. If I can get this oil process going, I shan't need to trouble you or anyone any more. He obviously intended you to help me if you thought fit. You remember he told old Herries, the solicitor who drew up the will——"

"He put nothing into the will, and that's all I know about it. Herries is a doddering old fool, anyway, and his memory's none of the best. If a man makes a will and then people start doing with his estate what they think ought to be done, there'd be no stability left in the world. I tell you, Hugh, I'm not going to let you have money—now or ever. Understand that, and don't come here again."

His voice had been rising steadily, and his speech ended with a violent outburst of coughing that seemed to rack him from head to foot. His face and neck went purple; his breath came in great jerks; and his whole body trembled. Chandler, who was used to these paroxysms, took no notice, waiting quietly for the outbreak to subside.

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"Yes, Uncle," he remarked at last, his perspiring hands now closing and unclosing on his tightly rolled handkerchief. "I know that's your view. But I thought that if I showed you the plans and let you know what I'd achieved, you might see your way——"

"I tell you I'm not interested! You've come to me before now with that story. If you were anything of the man your uncle was, you'd raise the money you say you need on your own efforts. I'm no judge of these processes of yours, but I know this: If there was any good in it, you could go into the City and get someone to back you. The whole thing's just imagination, if you ask me. What about that man you said was helping you—what was his name, Brinley, Brimsgrove, or something, wasn't it? Isn't he doing anything? You told me he knew his job. Well, if he's turned it down, I say it's no good, and I'm not doing anything about it. If I did let you have—— How much was it? Five thousand? Five thousand fiddlesticks!—you'd be back here in six months asking for more."

For the first time in his interviews with Wiseman, Chandler felt his temper rising. Ineffective in most things, he was absorbed in his work. He had taken an honours degree in science at an early age, and ever since he had left the Royal College of Science he had devoted almost every thought to developing a new process of producing oil from coal—a process in which he believed implicitly and in which independent experts had expressed high hopes. He did not mind what Wiseman might say about his character or lack of it; he did resent reflections on his work.

"You know that's all wrong, Uncle," he retorted hotly. "You know I'm a technical man and I admit I haven't a business head—the two rarely go together, you know. I want to see this thing going in the right way. I might go

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into the City, but if I got the money I should have to give up my independence and work just to keep some financier in comfort and let the process go hang. They'd want to exploit it—put it on the market and get money out of people who couldn't afford it, and then let the whole thing drop when they'd made what they could. My God!"

Wiseman rose shakily to his feet.

"It's no good being rude, or telling me what's business and what isn't. I've had more experience than you, though you may have degrees and letters after your name. They're a lot of good, anyway. No one ever got rich on them. But I know this: I'm not going to let you have any money, either from the estate or as a business proposition. You're just another of these imaginative inventors whose swans always turn out geese, and if I started lending you money, you'd just use it up and come back for more. If I had any faith at all in you, I might do something—might, I say. But I haven't. You haven't the spirit of a mouse. You're full up to the brim with book knowledge without an ounce of practical common sense. You——"

Chandler was on his feet now. He interrupted Wiseman's outburst.

"Oh, shut up!" He began to shout. "I might have known that a crabbed old skinflint like you wouldn't do anything. Why the hell do I come to you? Uncle Joshua would have helped me; all you care about is seeing how much money you can pour into your own banking account. If I were a stranger, you'd let me have ten thousand without a qualm, if I promised you ten per cent. If I was some quack with a packet of useless herbs that I claimed was an asthma cure, you'd be all over me in your anxiety to help. You and your money and your asthma! It'll kill you soon, anyway, with all that garbage you take, and you can't bank your money

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in the next world. You've had a bad night, I can see that. Your cough's killing you. Good! I hope it kills you soon. I hope to God you die, and die quickly. That'll be one more damned rat gone from the world."

"Get out! Get out, you insolent swine!" Wiseman's face was flushed. A vein stood out on his temple and pulsed angrily. His whole body was quivering. "Get out! I may be old, and I may be sick. But I'm going on living, if only to keep you out of your money. I don't want to see you again. Get *out,* I say, or——"

He made a spasmodic effort to lift his stick, falling back into his chair in a torture of coughing. Chandler, white and scared, stood uncertainly for a moment. He knew Wiseman's heart was weak, and he wondered if he had gone too far. This attack was worse than anything he had ever seen. He made a hesitating movement towards the cough-racked figure in the chair, but Wiseman, with unexpected strength, thrust him away. Chandler turned and fled from the room. On the threshold he nearly knocked over a tall, spare woman with angular features who gave him a withering glance and strode into the room.

Wiseman had recovered a little. His face was still livid; his cough came spasmodically now that the first onset had worn off. He looked up sharply as Miss Prillkins came towards him, a grim expression on her face.

"Why, Mr. Wiseman," she began, "I heard a disturbance in this room, and I thought I'd better come to investigate. One must keep one's eye on what is happening; we can't have the tone of the house upset. You look ill. Let me help you to your flat. You'll be better there."

Wiseman scowled. He had no patience with Miss Prillkins, nor she with him. Their opinions on the efficacy of

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fresh air were diametrically opposite, and it coloured all their relations. Even at bridge, their common meeting-ground, their views on play were usually violently opposed for no other reason than a mutual antipathy.

He dourly accepted Miss Prillkins's muscular arm and stumbled to the door.

"I've had a slight—er—disagreement," he wheezed at last, as they went down the corridor towards the west-wing lift. "A young man named Hugh Chandler. Perhaps you saw him?"

Miss Prillkins's determined mouth set into a thin, firm, and disapproving line.

"I did," she said emphatically. "He nearly knocked me over as he came from the rest room, and he did not even apologize. Typical of the youth of today, Mr. Wiseman. No respect for their elders, no sense of discipline. I strive constantly—and not without success, I believe—to imbue those principles of respect and discipline into my girls. Their disregard is the curse of the times, as all of us with a sense of responsibility to the future and the country must recognize."

The look on her face suggested that her methods of inculcating her principles might be unequivocal. Her grip on Wiseman's arm tightened so much that he made a weak effort to shake himself free.

"Now, Mr. Wiseman, don't try to be independent. You are unwell. I shall take you to your flat and see you settled. Shall I call the doctor?"

Wiseman shook his head; they proceeded in silence *via* the lift to the top floor. In his flat, he dropped into the big chair. He looked round for a moment and asked Miss Prillkins to give him a dose of some dark fluid from a

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bottle whose neck bore the remains of a patent-medicine stamp. She hovered over him while he took the draught, waiting for him to speak.

"Yes, you're quite right, Miss Prillkins," he said slowly. "Modern youth is quite irresponsible. That young rascal seems to forget that I'm an ailing man. But he shall have his lesson. I don't think we shall see him again."

He paused; after a while he resumed, more to himself than to his companion.

"Wants me to die, does he? Thinks I'm better out of the way? All right, but I shan't die. I'm not going to die."

"Of course you're not." Miss Prillkins looked at the tightly closed window with profound disfavour. "If I might make a suggestion, Mr. Wiseman, don't you think you'd feel better if I opened the window just a little? The air is lovely today."

Wiseman sat up abruptly.

"No!" he rapped. "Don't touch that window. Do you want to kill me too?" He looked at her darkly. "Anyone might think you were in league with that young puppy. Open window indeed! I believe everyone in this place will be glad to get rid of me. We'll see, we'll see."

His rising choler brought on the attack again. He coughed loudly. Miss Prillkins, feeling that duty was done, departed hurriedly. Only when she was entering her own flat did she remember that he had said no word of thanks for her help. She pursed her lips. Base ingratitude, she commented to herself; after all, she had rescued the man. With a firm gesture, she threw open the window and admitted a gust of wind that scattered a pile of papers over the entire floor.

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CHAPTER III

JOHNSON stepped out of the lift, pausing to talk to the attendant, a special crony of his.

"You know, Albert," he remarked thoughtfully, "I'm in two minds about my holiday. Between you and me and the gate-post, what would you do?"

Albert scratched his head thoughtfully.

"Well, I do say it's 'ard," he said slowly, as though turning some weighty matter over in his mind. "After all, you've been valet here since we opened, and I can't see why you should 'ave to miss yer 'oliday just because old Jim's walked out. That was a rum go, any'ow," he added. "'E 'ad a good job 'ere, and then 'e leaves sudden-like, without giving no reason."

"Yes, it's hard all right." Johnson was too absorbed in his own problems to discuss those of Jim, the departed valet. "Means I've got the east half of the sixth as well as my own half to do. It's more than flesh and blood can stand. Besides, we've booked our rooms and paid for them. And I gave up my holiday earlier in the year just to be obliging. It's a crying shame, that's what I say."

"Why don't you clear out, like old Jim? After all, you'd get another job easy, wouldn't you?"

"To be sure, I would. Never known what it is to be out o' work for more'n a week. I knows my job, I do." He

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nodded sagely. "I'll have to think about it. Well, I've got to go and do old Sniff-and-Smell—he'll be roaring for his breakfast." Johnson braced himself and wrinkled his nose in distaste. "Beats me why I put up with it. That flat of his makes me stomach turn every time I go in it. And it's not even October yet, but he's got all the radiators going full blast. Like a 'othouse, it is."

"Ar." Albert endeavoured to look knowing. "I'll be seeing you, mate," he said, as Johnson strode off down the corridor to resume his work.

Two minutes later he had brought his lift back again to the top floor in answer to the persistent ringing of the bell. He was so irate that he used the emergency button to open the automatic doors, which flew back with a resounding crash. He stepped out to speak his mind. The impatient caller had kept his finger on the bell-push all the time the lift had been ascending. Albert may have been a lift-attendant, but he was conscious of his rights and was prepared to stand up for them.

" 'Ere, you carn't——" he began hotly. "Why, it's you!" His tone altered as he saw Johnson. "Wot's up, mate?"

The valet was leaning against the wall, waving his hands feebly. It was only after several attempts that he found himself able to speak.

"It's Wiseman! Phew, it gave me a nasty turn! The old codger's sitting there, dead as mutton."

"But——"

"I know what you're going to say. Yes, he was all right when I took in his tea at seven. A bit peaked, I thought. But now he's dead. Come and look for yourself."

The recital of the news restored his confidence and he walked along the corridor. Albert, with a pleasant sense of drama stirring in his heart, followed readily enough. Sion

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