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ROOM "99."

BY FRANCIS WORCESTER DOUGHTY.



JUST as there are old forgotten churches in New York, located in by streets, whose very names are known only to those immediately interested, so there are old-time hotels, once popular resorts and familiar to every one, but now far beyond the range of public recollection, and kept in existence only by the patronage of certain persons, whose peculiar interests wed them to the house.

Such a hotel, until quite recently, flourished on a prominent down-town street just off Broadway. Dry goods buyers would go there and nowhere else. The uninitiated wondered how the house could possibly maintain its existence, and yet it flourished, until one day the buyers, for some unexplained reason, suddenly began to give it the cold shoulder. That settled its fate. The house was pulled down, but it was only a type of many others, not a few of which are still in existence. One must be entirely familiar with New York, to know and recognize them. Persons thoroughly acquainted with all the ins and outs of the metropolis, are growing scarcer day by day, and it is doubtful if a dozen could be found, without special reasons for knowing, who ever

heard of Benson's Hotel, for many years the favorite resort of schooner captains and stone men, whose business interests lay with the marble and granite yards at Corlear's Hook.

Yet until recently Benson's Hotel did a flourishing business on lower Jackson street, ground since cleared to make room for the Corlear's Hook Park.

All around it were tenements of the lower class, but on its immediate block a few of the old Quaker families still resided with here and there some prosperous German or Irish contractor sandwiched in between them. In those days Benson's Hotel was full every night with a line of guests who, if not laying claim to "Style," certainly had plenty of money to spend.

Late on one raw November day several years ago, Dr. Willard Wylde, a young M. D., who had just passed his matriculation, while riding from Port Jervis to New York on the Erie Railroad chanced to overhear some strange statements in relation to Benson's Hotel.

He was seated in the smoking-car, half asleep, with his head against the window and his hat pulled down over his eyes, when the train stopped at Middletown, and a stout, prosperous-looking man, evidently a drummer, entered the car and claimed acquaintance with the gentlemen in the seat directly in front of Dr. Wylde.

"What brought me up here?" Wylde overheard him say, in response to his friend's question after the first cordial greetings had been exchanged. "Why, I've been to the Middletown Insane Asylum to see poor Randall."

"Indeed," was the reply. "Is he any better?"

"No; nor never will be."

"Still raving about the lady with the green hair?"

"Just the same. Mysterious, ain't it?"

"Very, as I understand the story."

"Wonder if you know it as it really is?"

"Can't say. Heard he went on a terrible toot, was missing for weeks and finally turned up stark mad, and able to talk about nothing but this mysterious female with the green hair."

"You're dead wrong, my dear fellow. Randall, hadn't drank a drop in a year, and I know it. He had the misfortune to occupy room 99 at Benson's Hotel last May. I understand no one has ever occupied it since."

"And what may that mean?"

"Let me explain; that room is at the bottom of the whole business. For the last three years as many as six men who have occupied it have disappeared mysteriously during the night, in every instance their baggage being found undisturbed in the morning, not a thing missing but the lodger, who never in any instance, except in the case of Randall, has been seen or heard of again. It took the proprietor some time to grasp the situation, for months would elapse between these mysterious disappearances, and at first it was supposed that the missing man had simply made off for reasons of his own, though just how it is hard to determine, for I understand the door was always found locked on the inside, and the only window in the room is rather too high for a jump; but the hotel people know it now, and, as I said before, since poor Randall was found wandering about the streets mad, no one has ever been allowed to sleep in room 99, and I very much doubt if anyone ever will again."

Now to all this and more—for the conversation did not end here—Dr. Wylde listened with close attention.

The drummer's strange story produced on his mind a most powerful impression.

Willard Wylde loved mystery better than he loved the profession he had chosen, which, truth told, he did not love at all. Possessed of ample means, and under no necessity to practice, this young man had preferred the pen to scalpel and medicine chest. Perhaps he was a literary genius—at least, he thought so, for he had already written two novels—tales of mystery—published at his own expense, and was now at work on a third.

Mystery! It was Willard Wylde's pet word. A mysterious room in a hotel—a real mystery! The very thing! It must be investigated—it should be, and at once.

Then and there Dr. Wylde resolved to sleep in Room 99, Benson's Hotel, that very night.

He had to look in a directory to find the house, when the ferry boat landed him in New York, for he had never heard of it before, and when he found that it was located on lower Jackson street he had to look in the back of the big book to find where that was, for Jackson street was to him as much an unknown quantity as Benson's Hotel.

But Dr. Wylde saw other streets on the East Side of New York that evening, the very names of which were strange to him, before he reached his destination; for fatigued with sitting in the cars and being unincumbered with other baggage than a

small grip, he undertook to walk to Benson's, going through the notorious "Polish Jew Quarter," by way of Canal street to its junction with Jefferson, and thence by way of Monroe street to Jackson, where he found the house without difficulty, being guided by the bright light which burned above the door.

Dr. Wylde was one of those quiet, self-centered, determined young men who having once taken a resolve, never for an instant entertain the thought of retreat.

He paused in front of the hotel only long enough to take in its surroundings, the chill November wind sweeping bleakly up from the East river as he looked.

Certainly there was nothing mysterious or forbidding in the appearance of Benson's Hotel, which stood about midway on the block between two old fashioned brick houses, seemingly still occupied by private families. Alongside the door of the house toward the river was a doctor's sign. By the light of the hotel lamp Wylde read the name, Dr. Klix, the usual designation of office hours being below. On the corner beyond was a drug store, and directly opposite a livery stable with several tumble-down frame buildings on either side.

Such was the general appearance of the block. The hotel was decidedly the brightest spot upon it, and when Wylde entered and walked up to the desk he found that it was brighter inside than without, for a crackling wood fire burning in an open hearth, around which a number of plain, but substantial looking guests sat smoking, talking and reading, gave the office a decidedly home-like look, and this more particularly since this room and those which opened off from it, writing room, billiard room and bar were well kept and scrupulously clean.

"Can I have a room here to-night, sir?" asked Wylde, placing his grip on the counter.

"Certainly," replied the clerk. "Will you register?"

Wylde wrote a name in the big book. "I would like room 99 if you could let me have it," he quietly said.

The clerk shot a curious glance at him.

"Why do you ask for that particular room?" he inquired.

"A friend of mine who recommended me here occupied it two years ago. He told me it was a good room."

"Sorry, sir, 99 is engaged. I can give you 98, right opposite. Exactly the same kind of room."

"I should prefer 99."

"For any particular reason?"

"The reason I have named."

"You might ask the proprietor. I can't give it to you."

Wylde saw that he had reached the end of his rope. To ask the proprietor after having been thus emphatically refused by the clerk would be pretty certain to force him to show his hand—precisely what he did not propose to do.

"Oh, very well; it makes no difference," he said, carelessly. "Show me to 98."

It was now half-past eight o'clock. Wylde washed up, left his grip in the room, and went down into the restaurant on the first floor and ordered supper, which surprised him by proving uncommonly good.

At half-past nine he was back in 98 again, where he sat reading until midnight—reading and listening, waiting for the house to quiet down for the night, and as determined as ever to sleep in no room but 99.

Another hour passed. The house was quiet now. The lodger in 96 had long since retired; 94 appeared to be unoccupied, and no one had passed along the corridor since half-past eleven.

"Now is about my time," murmured Wylde, closing his book. "I think I will make a move on 99. Probably I shan't succeed in getting in, and if that's the case I'll stay here to-morrow night and try it again."

He softly opened his door, listened for a moment, and then stepped across the corridor, and still more softly tried the door of room 99.

It was locked, but the fastening seemed to be of the cheapest description, for the door rattled as he shook it. Wylde slipped back into his room, and took from his grip a piece of wire, which he used to clean the briar pipe, to which he was devoted. Bending this and applying it to the keyhole, he soon mastered the lock, threw back the door, and found himself looking into room 99, dimly illuminated by the moonlight which stole in through the window.

There was nothing unusual in the room; in fact, it was the very twin brother of 98, with its single bed, bureau, chair and washstand. The only difference was the window, which opened just beyond the rear wall of the adjoining house, and overlooked the river. As Wylde glanced out, he could see the lights on the Brooklyn shore, with a Williamsburgh ferryboat heading up stream for its slip at the foot of Broadway.

"This is all right. I stay here," thought the young man.

"No one need ever know it, and my curiosity may be gratified, although I doubt it. but at least I shall have the satisfaction of having humored my fancy, whether anything comes of it or not."

Again he returned to 98, put out the gas and brought over his grip, umbrella, hat and overcoat. Then lighting the gas in 99 but leaving it turned low, he shot the bolt on the inside of the door and threw himself on the bed, not to sleep, but to await for developments. Such at least was his intention and for perhaps an hour he faithfully adhered to it, part of the time on the bed and then when the sleepy fit came pacing the floor, then throwing himself on the bed again, which last he did once too often, for the drowsy god caught him when he least expected it. He never knew that he had lost himself until he was suddenly aroused by three sharp, distinct raps.

Wylde started up to find himself staring at a figure standing beside the bed.

A woman—a woman in white, young, of tall, symmetrical figure, a face surpassingly beautiful in its molding, and such hair—such astonishing hair!

It was a yellowish-green shade seen in that dim light, and had a curious sheen about it—Wylde could think of nothing but corn-silk as he gazed, half stupefied—of that and the ravings of poor Randall as described by his friend. The words flashed back upon his memory:

"Still raving about the lady with the green hair."

Wylde tried to pull his wits together to get up to say something, but her eyes were fixed upon him, and for his life he could not have removed his gaze from those eyes of hers, which seemed to shine like two lurid flames between the folds of that wondrous hair, brought down over the forehead and ears in a style strange enough then, but decidedly *a la mode* now.

"Come!" she whispered. "Come! You must come! Dr. Wylde, get up off that bed and follow me!"

Was it hypnotism?

That or something closely akin to it must have influenced Willard Wylde then.

She glided backward between the window and the bed with both hands outstretched toward him, and Wylde simply arose and followed her—followed through an opening in the wall the full size of an ordinary door, which he had not seen when he examined the room.

He knew he was doing it—he remembered everything—the

story of the mysterious disappearances in this room was uppermost in his mind as he did it. And yet he did it just the same and without the power to utter a word.

The instant he crossed the threshold the figure vanished and all was darkness. The spell was broken, but too late for a retreat. The panel behind him closed with a snap. Wylde heard it, but before he could turn he was suddenly pushed forward into a blaze of light.

Utterly confounded, Wylde just stood and stared.

He was standing, surrounded by iron bars which reached above his head, looking between them into what appeared to be a chemist's laboratory, with its crucibles and muffles, its flasks, beakers and bottles, all so familiar to him in his student days.

Just beyond the bars was a long bench, beside which stood an elderly man, with gray whiskers and bald shiny head, wearing a greasy dressing-gown, and busily shaking an orange colored liquid in a flask over an alcohol lamp. His back was turned to Wylde, and he seemed intent upon his work and wholly oblivious to the young man's presence, until suddenly placing the flask in a rest, he turned and faced the prisoner behind the bars.

And such a face! Cold, hard, stern, unyielding, not one soft line of sympathy upon it. German, perhaps; foreign certainly, but the voice spoke good English, when it said:

"Good-evening, doctor. I presume you are somewhat disturbed to find yourself in my laboratory. I am busy for the moment, working down this solution of bi-chromate of manganese. Just amuse yourself by trying to escape, until I am through. They all have to do it, and you may as well get through with it at once."

To do justice to Wylde's feelings, as this strange being turned from him, and again taking the flask in his hand, began shaking it over the flame, would be to attempt the impossible. Enough to say that his coolness did not desert him, now that the baleful influence of those terrible eyes was removed from him, Wylde's will was all his own.

"I have already tried the wall behind me," he quietly said. "If it is not made of iron it is of something just as hard; as for this cage I presume whoever made it intended that it should be secure."

"You are right," replied the old man without looking around. "Just a moment, doctor, and I will attend to your case; the precipitate is falling and it is necessary for me to watch the method

of crystalization. There! It is done. Now then, my friend! First, who am I?"

"Not knowing, I couldn't say," replied Wylde with the same studied calmness; "but may I ask how you know me?"

"Assuredly. I don't know you. I read your name on your grip in room 99. You chose to paint Dr. before it, so I assume that you *are* a doctor, of what I neither know nor care. It may be medicine, law, divinity, horses or corns, it is all one to me, you will serve my purpose just as well."

"And that purpose?"

"Young man, you are cool. Usually I have to deal with prayers, pleadings, terror, rage——"

"Enough. Come to the point, please!" broke in Wylde. "I know all about the disappearances in room 99. I undertook to investigate this mysterious business, and I seem likely to succeed; be good enough to explain as quickly as possible what your purpose is."

"My purpose," replied the old man, fixing his cold eyes upon Wylde, "is to investigate you."

"Your explanation explains nothing. Who are you?"

"To another I should not answer, but your frankness demands its equivalent. Look at me. I am Klix—the great Klix."

"Ah! The doctor next door. I saw your sign."

The old man stamped his foot in rage. "Saw my sign!" he roared. "Ha! And this is fame! Surely you can be no doctor. I am Klix—Klix, on the brain!"

"Stop! I remember! A dry German work in six volumes dated forty years back! You wrote that?"

"I did. It is my work. It is the only complete treatise on the brain ever published. Swedenborg's ponderous tome is mere child's prattle in comparison. Huxley——"

"Never mind about Huxley. Dr. Klix, I have heard of your work, but I never read it and probably never shall. Go on."

The old man gave a contemptuous sniff.

"It is not for such as you," he said, "but still I like you. I'm glad you have come. You are different from the others; to vivisect the brain of a coward, a fool, a drunkard or one afflicted with any other form of mental weakness is something I have already tried many times, but yours will be different. In your case I may succeed in finding the seat of the *ego*, the thinking principle, in other words, what fools and fanatics term the soul."

"Ha, my friend!" he continued, as Wylde stared at him be-

tween the bars, "your face pales and well it may. Know your fate! I want the upper half of both hemispheres of your cerebrum! I have immediate use for them, to work up material for the sixty-second chapter of my coming work on the human brain now approaching completion. I presume you will offer no objection to parting with this slice of your anatomy. If you are really a doctor you must know that should the operation be skillfully performed you will still live; muscular power will still remain to you; your intelligence will be sufficient to enable you to perform the offices of nature, to eat, sleep, find your way from one place to another and things of that sort. In short you will stand about on the plane of a well preserved idiot. You will become an animal, and all in the interest of science. One thing more; I shall administer no anæsthetic—such is not my purpose. I can best study your cerebrum in a state of high mental excitement; such a state as you are rapidly approaching now as you stand there with your eyes starting out of your head with horror grasping those bars which will not yield. Come! Come! Come to the operating table! The sooner the better! Come now!"

Higher and higher grew the pitch of his voice as he pronounced these concluding words.

He had not over described the sensations of his victim.

Horror uncontrollable had seized Wylde at last. He shook the bars and shouted out one frantic appeal for mercy—a despairing cry for help.

Useless! He knew it too.

He felt that he was dealing with a madman—an enthusiast—a crank.

"That's right—that's right! Work yourself up!" cried Dr. Klix. "Beautiful! Do it again! Shout once more!"

At the same instant he stamped his foot violently upon the floor, and a sudden and overpowering electric current shot through poor Wylde, racking him from head to foot, and reducing him to a state of entire unconsciousness. When a sense of his surroundings returned he lay strapped down upon an operating table, with the doctor standing beside a small stand upon which a lamp with a powerful reflector had been placed, the light striking full upon Wylde's cranium. By the side of the lamp lay numerous glittering instruments—knives of curious shapes, scissors, probes, etc., the uses of which the young physician knew only too well.

Wylde stared at all this dumbly. He could not speak.

But Dr. Klix could and did.

"So you have come to life again!" he began. "Good! You yielded to the shock beautifully. No kicking, no struggles—that's the animal—you are a man. The last one I had out of 99 made me no end of trouble. He even refused to die after I was through with him, so I let him go after his head was healed. I may let you go, or I may keep you here in this house to study the effect of my operation, or you may die. It really makes little difference which."

Then as Wylde did not respond, he went on :

"Before I begin and you lose your higher consciousness, let me satisfy your curiosity about that room. The Benson House was formerly a factory; it was altered into its present shape some years ago. I don't know who built that secret door, nor why, but I happened to find it, and I have utilized it to furnish me with living subjects. That, doctor, is the full explanation of the mystery of room 99."

It was explanation enough for Wylde. All chance of escape seemed to have passed, and as the young man lay there much of the horror of his desperate situation seemed to have left him. He found himself unable to think of it. He could scarcely follow Dr. Klix as he rattled on; his mind wandered back to his boyhood days; scenes and faces long forgotten seemed to flit before him; the room seemed filled with people, and among them his bewildered brain showed him the faces of many who had long been dead.

Now the doctor ceased to speak, and turned to the bench where Wylde had first seen him. Again the alcohol lamp was lighted, and a large flask containing a colorless liquid was placed in the rest.

For a moment Dr. Klix watched its ebullition and then seemingly satisfied turned his face toward Wylde and began to talk.

"The time has come," he said. "As soon as that flask thoroughly boils I shall proceed to the operation. The extraction of your cerebrum will be reserved until the last; my first move will be to examine the posterior corner of the lateral ventricle. Have no fear. I am able to perform this operation with perfect safety; you will surely recover from its effects. I am the creator of the great truth that the hippocampus minor is not peculiar to man as formerly taught. It was I who explained to Professor Huxley—heavens! It boils already—more than boils! What carelessness! I——"

He had seized the flask and attempted to raise it from the flames, but too late!

In the midst of his self-satisfied reflections the flask exploded; its contents broke into flame and scattered right and left.

With a cry of profound agony Dr. Klix clapped his hands to his face and dropped like a stone, while Wylde, with staring eyes and wildly beating heart saw the floor, the bench, the heavy curtains at the windows and the clothing of the fallen man burst into a blaze.

At the same instant a scream rang out; the door flew open and "the lady with the green hair" burst into the room.

"Father! Father!" she shouted. "Dead! Thank God! The day of this evil house is done!"

So much Wylde heard, so much he saw but no more, for in the same moment the break came.

Faint, or swoon—call it what you will—he knew no more until he found himself lying on a lounge in the back room behind the prescription desk at the corner drug store, with several men around him.

"He's all right," said one, as he opened his eyes; "something falling from the burning house must have struck him."

"By the way," said another, "did you hear if Miss Klix got out all safe?"

"Certainly she did," was the reply; "but the old doctor must have been dead before his daughter got into the room after the explosion—at least, she thinks so, but she had no time to investigate; it was all she could do to get out alive."

Had she time to take him from the operating table and drag him to the street?

Dr. Wylde always thought so, but he never knew, for he never saw "the lady with the green hair" afterward—never heard of her—never wants to.

When at last he left the drug store, having told a story according with the remark he overheard, he pushed his way through the crowd, with one hasty glance at the ruined house of Dr. Klix.

The Benson House was scorched, and the guests badly scared, and the next day it was reported in the papers that one of them was missing, the name given being the fictitious one Wylde had signed to the register.

But Wylde never explained; he never even returned to claim his grip and let the clerk know that he still lived. He felt no further interest in the Benson House. He had solved the mystery of "Room 99."