

Short story - **The Schnorr House** -

“Never trust a real estate agent,” Frederic muttered as yet another floorboard turned out to be rotten. ““Look dear, it’s lovely, we can fix it right up and run a shop out front,’ you said. Ha! What a laugh.” Three years ago, Frederic and his family bought a run-down, albeit beautiful, house in Schneeberg, Germany. According to historian’s records, the house dated back to the 13th century, and was the home of well-to-do metal workers. Local rumor even suggested that there were still heaps of silver in a hidden cellar.

The house needed work. Workmen had been hired to replace floorboards, fix up ancient doors, repair ceilings, and put in new plumbing. Frederic, his wife Gerta, and his daughter, Wiebke, did as much work they could to help lessen the towering renovation costs of the three-story house. The two women spent their time cleaning up the small courtyard and sewing new curtains and linens for the rooms. They also ran errands all over town, picking up more paint, several new wrenches – the first three broke – and seemingly never-ending bags of food for the workmen and the family. Frederic helped the workmen with what he could – and what they would let him – do. He was kept busy painting the newly repaired walls, carting wheelbarrows of bricks and tile, and general trying to speed up the process.

It seems to be working, he thought. In a few weeks is the third anniversary of ownership of the ‘Schnorr house’, and we’ve finished renovating all but three rooms and half the courtyard. Still, he winced as one of the long-time workmen, Hans, used a crowbar to wrench up the long-rotten floorboard with a sickening crack, I wish I could snap my fingers and be done with it.

“Watch it Hans!” Frederic yelled. The workman had stumbled backwards, dropping the crowbar alarmingly close to the house owner’s foot. Sighing in relief, Frederic left the third floor sitting room to go find his wife. He found her in the courtyard.

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“Hello Frederic! If you’re looking for Wiebke, she went to the market. We ran out of milk just in time for lunch,” Gerta exclaimed. She was crouched near the west wall of the square courtyard, gardening. The half of the courtyard where she was had been completely redone, wobbly stones replaced, and weeds removed; it was almost idyllic. The other half was the epitome of procrastination. The stones had all been deemed safe, but weeds sprouted from in between them, and the corners were the dull gray of manmade stone, not a flower in sight. Frederic’s task over the next three weeks was to start fixing up the east end of the courtyard. Hopefully he’d have it done just in time for an anniversary celebration with the rest of the town present.

“Thank you dear, I was actually looking for you,” he said. “I was hoping you’d help me clean up the rest of the weeds in the courtyard while I clear that pile of concrete and rocks in the south corner.” There was indeed a large pile of rubble in said corner: pieces the size of loaves of bread, pebbles the size of corn kernels; the pile was 3 feet high and the last eyesore in the house.

Gerta smiled wearily, “Sure love, but it’ll have to wait until later today. My back hurts after all this gardening!” Standing up to her full 5’3” height, the round, middle-aged woman shuffled over to the door to the main foyer. “Be careful dear, I’ll call you for lunch when it’s ready.”

“Uh huh,” replied Frederic. He had barely even heard his wife’s warning, as he was too preoccupied with the task before him. *Good grief*, he thought, *that’s a lot of rock to haul. Maybe I could get one of the workmen to do it?*

A loud BOOM sounded throughout the courtyard from inside the house. Frederic jumped. “What in all of Germany was that!?” he shouted. Whipping around to the source of the noise, he saw some smoke rising from a third story window. Hans, the workman, poked his head out. “Don’t worry sir! It was nothing, just a little accident ya!” He turned his head around to talk to one of his helpers, and then turned back out, “Klaus he just found himself some old gunpowder here in ‘zis closet. No one was hurt.” Hans then disappeared back into the room, presumably to continue working.

No, it’s probably not a good idea to have them help with this. Too much could go wrong. Frederic sighed, and then turned around to look at the pile of stones again. *I don’t suppose that if I stare at it long enough, it’ll go away?* Shaking his head, the house owner took off his glasses and rubbed them on his shirt. *Guess not, might as well get started.*

Frederic wasn’t tall, or strong. In comparison, the man was rather short for a full-grown man, about 5’7” or so. He didn’t work out regularly, even though he had signed up to several gyms to take advantage of the “Buy now and get the first three months free!” opportunity. Because of his stature, Frederic determined that using a wheelbarrow to do away with the wreckage was probably safest. Unfortunately, the corner had two sections; the first was easily accessible by wheelbarrow, it was pretty wide. The second part of the south corner was deeper set, almost as if the original architect wanted to expand the corner into a room, but decided to stop and leave it the way it was. Frederic would have to leave the wheelbarrow several feet outside of that part – once he got to it of course.

First, he went to get what he’d need for lugging rocks. A crowbar the length of his arm to act as a lever, a bucket for the smaller pebbles, a pickaxe to dislodge the stubborn stones, and lastly, the wheelbarrow, that after being used so much for the past 3 years, was crusted with concrete and dented in nearly a dozen places. “There” he states, dusting his hands off. “Now I guess if nothing else really important is going to happen, I ought to get started.”

Just then, his wife called from the second floor dining room, “Frederic! Lunch is ready, come eat!”

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After lunch Frederic wiped his hands on his work trousers and thanked Gerta for the meal. He looked around the room, hoping that something else could hold his attention for just a little longer before – gulp – he had to *work*. Alas, he found everything being attended to by his family and those working for them. Frederic let out a huge sigh, and then left the room, returning to his mass of rocks.

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Several hours later, the sun was leaving the courtyard. Looking up, Frederic wiped his sweaty forehead. *It must be past three o'clock already. I'll go in after finishing this one wheelbarrow load.* The man had thrown himself at the work, hoping to finish it quickly. Already he had reached the inner part of the corner, and was working his way to the middle where there were a few especially stubborn stones.

Picking up the pickaxe, he edged around some of the larger boulders and braced himself to take on a very big - partially buried in dirt - stone that was blocking his way to the back wall. Grunting with effort, he lifted the pickaxe above his head and drove it down into the ground. Then, shifting his body, he started to push against the handle of the tool, using it as a lever to pull the rock from the dirt. After what seemed like hours, he felt the handle give a little. Triumph flooded his system. He was almost there. Frederic yanked the pickaxe from the ground, and giving another huge heave, drove it deeper, closer to the base of the crag. This time, the man positioned himself behind the handle of the pickaxe, hoping to pull it towards him. Grabbing hold, he forced himself to use all his strength. He thought about the past three years. He thought of how tired he was of it all: the renovation, the workmen, the subsequent noise, the costs, everything. He thought this one behemoth of a rock represented all the frustration and tears this house had caused him and his family. He pulled as hard as he could, harder even, and he could feel the rock shifting, the handle moving, he was almost done!

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From the other side of the household, Gerta and her daughter, Wiebke, were painting the third floor showroom. Gerta was mid-swipe of her brush when she heard a dull rumble, then a man's yell. She quite literally dropped everything onto the tile floor and ran outside, Wiebke merely a few steps behind her. When they arrived in the courtyard, billowing clouds of dust were settling. The two women rushed to the corner Frederic had been working. "Frederic! Can you hear me? Are you alright?" they babbled. The ground had given way where Frederic had braced himself, the stone no longer held it up and it fell in, creating a well of darkness in which the women's husband and father was trapped.

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Frederic groaned. His head hurt like someone had cleaved through it with a letter opener. Blinking, he looked around him, taking stock of his injuries. His left leg was crumpled beneath him, bruised and sore, but he didn't think it was broken. His right leg was bent in front of him, pressing against his chest. Torso and arms were all in one piece, though quite battered. From what he could make out around him, he was in an old well or airshaft. The hole was about 10 feet deep; roots were pushing through the walls. He blinked up; the fading light from the afternoon sun was still visible. "Frederic! Can you hear me? Are you alright?" he heard. That was his family, he thought.

"I'm fine! Just hurry up and get me out of here!" Frederic yelled. He heard relieved chatter and his wife calling out orders to the workmen to get a rope and a first aid kit. Wiebke ran to call an ambulance.

The trapped man squinted. Now that his eyes were adjusting, he could see that the hole was wider than he first thought. It was roughly circular, dirt all the way through. Frederic shifted a bit, and something caught his eye. A twinkle. He took a closer look, touching the spot with his finger. It felt harder than the surrounding dirt. The disappearing sunlight glinted off the area. *What is this? Some sort of rock?* Frederic started to dig with his fingers, prying the shiny substance loose from the wall. He succeeded just as a rope was lowered. Stuffing the stone into his pocket, he started hauling himself up.

“Oh thank goodness you’re alright Frederic!” Gerta cried as she rushed to hug him.

“Dear, you’re making breathing a little bit of a trial.” Frederic choked out.

“Oh sorry, are you hurt badly? What was that hole anyway?” She pulled away from her husband, and looked at him worriedly. He smiled at her and pulled out the silver nugget from his pocket.

“I think I have a feeling.”

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Frederic and his family didn’t have to fret about the costs of the renovations any more after his accidental discovery of the air shaft to the silver cellar. The cellar had caved in long ago, but when men were sent down there to hollow out the hole, they discovered stonewalls and masses of silver nuggets and bars. A few made their way into the workers pockets, but they weren’t missed. At the third anniversary celebration of house-ownership Frederic made a toast: “To the real estate agent that sold us the house, and to ultimately getting around to the end of the chore!”