

The Adventure of the Norwood Builder

No. 2 of the Series

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FROM the point of view of the criminal expert," said Mr. Sherlock Holmes.

"London has become a singularly uninteresting city since the death of the late lamented Professor Moriarty."

"I can hardly think that you would find many decent citizens to agree with you," I answered.

"Well, well, I must not be selfish," said he, with a smile as he pushed back his chair from the breakfast table.

"The community is certainly the gainer and no one the loser save the pair out of work specialist, whose occupation has gone."

With that man in the field one's morning paper presented infinite possibilities. Often it was only the smallest trace, Watson, the faintest indication, and yet it was enough to tell me that the great malignant brain was there, as the greatest tremors of the edges of the web remind one of the foul spider which lurks in the center. Petty thefts, wanton assaults, purposeless outrages—to the man who held the clew all could be worked into one connected whole. To the scientific student of the higher criminal world no capital in Europe offered the advantages which London then possessed. But now? He shrugged his shoulders in humorous deprecation of

the state of things which he had himself done so much to produce.

At the time of which I speak, Holmes had been back for some months, and I at his request had sold my practice and returned to share the old quarters in Baker street. A young doctor named Kensington practice and given with astonishing little deans the highest price that I required to ask—an amount which only explained itself some time later when I found that Verner was a distant relation of Holmes and that it was my friend who had really found the money.

Our months of partnership had not been so uneventful as he had stated, for I had on looking over my notes that this period included the case of the papers of ex-President Murillo, and also the shocking affair of the Dutch steamship Friedland, which so nearly cost us both our lives. His cold and proud nature was always averse, however, to anything in the shape of public applause, and he bound me in the most stringent terms to say no further word of himself, his methods or his successes—a prohibition which, as I have explained, has only now been removed.

Mr. Sherlock Holmes was leaning back in his chair after his whimsical protest and was unfolding his morning paper in a leisurely fashion when my attention was arrested by a tremendous ring at the bell, followed immediately by a hollow drumming sound, as if some one were beating on the outer door with his fist. As it opened there came a tumultuous rush into the hall, rapid feet clattered up the stair and an instant later a wild-eyed and frantic young man, pale, disheveled and palpitating, burst into the room. He looked from one to the other of us, and under our gaze of inquiry he became conscious that some apology was needed for this unceremonious entry.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Holmes," he cried. "You mustn't blame me. I am nearly mad. Mr. Holmes, I am the unhappy John Hector McFarlane."

He made the announcement as if the name alone would explain both his visit and his manner, but I could see by my companion's unresponsive face that it meant no more to him than to me.

"Have a cigarette, Mr. McFarlane," said he, pushing his case across. "I am sure that with your symptoms my friend Dr. Watson here would prescribe a sedative. The weather has been so very warm these last few days. Now, if you feel a little more composed I should be glad if you would sit down in that chair and tell us very slowly and quietly who you are and what it is that you want. You men-

tioned your name as if I should recognize it, but I assure you that boy—the obvious facts that you are a bachelor, a solicitor, a Freemason and an asthmatic I know nothing whatever about you."

Familiar as I was with my friend's methods, it was not difficult for me to follow his deductions and to observe the untidiness of attire, the sheaf of legal papers, the watch chain and the breathing which had prompted them. Our client, however, stared in amazement.

"Yes, I am all that, Mr. Holmes, and in addition I am the most unfortunate man at this moment in London. For heaven's sake, don't abandon me, Mr. Holmes! If they come to arrest me before I have finished my story make them give me time so that I may tell you the whole truth. I could go to jail happy if I knew that you were working for me outside."

"Arrest you!" said Holmes. "This is really most gratifying—most interesting. On what charge do you expect to be arrested?"

"Upon the charge of murdering Mr. Jonas Oldacre of Lower Norwood."

My companion's expressive face showed a sympathy which was not, I am afraid, entirely unmixed with satisfaction.

"Dear me," said he, "it was only this moment at breakfast that I was saying to my friend Dr. Watson that sensational cases had disappeared out of our papers."

Our visitor stretched forward a quivering hand and picked up the Daily Telegraph, which still lay upon Holmes' knee.

"If you had looked at it, sir, you would have seen at a glance what the errand is on which I have come to you this morning. I feel as if my name and my misfortune must be in

every man's mouth." He turned it over to expose the central page. "Here it is, and with your permission I will read it to you. Listen to this, Mr. Holmes. The headlines are: 'Mysterious Affair at Lower Norwood. Disappearance of a Well Known Builder. Suspicion of Murder and Arson. A Clew to the Criminal.' That is the clew which they are already following. Mr. Holmes, and I know that it leads infallibly to me. I have been followed from London Bridge station, and I am sure that they are only waiting for the warrant to arrest me. It will break my mother's heart—it will break her heart!"

He wrung his hands in an agony of apprehension and thumped backward and forward in his chair.

I looked with interest upon this man who was accused of being the perpetrator of a crime of violence. He was flaxen haired and handsome, in a washed-out negative fashion, with frightened blue eyes and a clean shaven face, with a weak, sensitive mouth. His age may have been about twenty-seven, his dress and bearing that of a gentleman. From the pocket of his light summer overcoat protruded the bundle of indorsed papers which proclaimed his profession.

"We must use what time we have," said Holmes. "Watson, would you have the kindness to take the paper and to read the paragraph in question?"

Underneath the vigorous headlines which our client had quoted I read the following suggestive narrative:

Late last night or early this morning an incident occurred at Lower Norwood which points, it is feared, to a serious crime. Mr. Jonas Oldacre is a well known resident of that suburb, where he has carried on his business as a builder for many years. Mr. Oldacre is a bachelor, fifty-two years of age, and lives in Deep Dens House at the Sydenham end of the road of that name. He has had the reputation of being a man of eccentric habits, secretive and retiring. For some years he has practically withdrawn from the business in which he is said to have amassed considerable wealth. A small timber yard still exists, however, at the back of the house, and last night, about 12 o'clock, an alarm was given that one of the stacks was on fire. The engine was soon upon the spot, but the dry wood burned with great fury, and it was impossible to arrest the conflagration until the stack had been entirely consumed. Surprised was expressed at the absence of the master of the establishment from the scene of the fire, and an inquiry followed, which showed that he had disappeared from the house. An examination of his room revealed that the bed had not been slept in, that a safe which stood in it was open, that a number of important papers were there, and that a number of small, dark, and slightly traces of blood being found within

the room, and an oaken walking stick, which also showed stains of blood upon the handle. It is known that Mr. Jonas Oldacre had received a late visitor in his bedroom upon that night, and the stick found has been identified as the property of this person, who is a young London solicitor named John Hector McFarlane, junior partner of Graham & McFarlane of 48 Grosvenor buildings, E. C. The police believe that they have evidence in their possession which supplies a very convincing motive for crime, and altogether it cannot be doubted that sensational developments will follow.

Later—it is rumored as we go to press that John Hector McFarlane has actually been arrested on the charge of the murder of Jonas Oldacre. It is at least certain that a warrant has been issued. There have been further and sinister developments in the investigation at Norwood. Besides the signs of a struggle in the room of the unfortunate builder it is now known that the French windows of his bedroom (which is on the ground floor) were found to be open, that there were marks as if some bulky object had been dragged across to the wood pile, and finally it is asserted that charred remains have been found among the charcoal ashes of the fire. The police theory is that a most sensational crime has been committed, that the victim was clubbed to death by his own builder, or by a hired assassin, and his dead body dragged across to the woodstack, which was then ignited, in order to hide all traces of the crime. The conduct of the criminal investigation has been left in the experienced hands of Inspector Lestrade of Scotland Yard, who is following up the clews with his accustomed energy and sagacity.

Sherlock Holmes listened, with closed eyes and finger tips together, to this remarkable account.

"The case has certainly some points of interest," said he in his languid fashion. "May I ask, in the first place, Mr. McFarlane, how it is that you are still at liberty, since they appear to be enough evidence to justify your arrest?"

"I live at Torrington Lodge, Blackheath, with my parents, Mr. Holmes, but last night, having to do business very late with Mr. Jonas Oldacre, I stayed at a hotel in Norwood and came to my business from there. I knew nothing of this affair until I was in the train, when I read what you have just heard. I at once saw the horrible danger of my position, and I hurried to put the case into your hands. I have no doubt that I should have been arrested either at my city office or at my home. A man followed me from London Bridge station, and I have no doubt—Great heaven! what is that?"

It was a clang of the bell, followed instantly by heavy steps upon the stair. A moment later our old friend Lestrade appeared in the doorway. Over his shoulder I caught a glimpse of one or two uniformed policemen outside.

"Mr. John Hector McFarlane?" said Lestrade.

Our unfortunate client rose, with a ghastly face.

"I arrest you for the willful murder of Mr. Jonas Oldacre of Lower Norwood."

McFarlane turned to us with a gesture of despair and sank into his chair once more like one who is crushed.

"One moment, Lestrade," said Holmes. "Half an hour more or less can make no difference to you, and the gentleman was about to give us an account of this very interesting affair which might aid us in clearing it up."

"I think there will be no difficulty in clearing it up," said Lestrade grimly.

"None the less, with your permission, I should be much interested to hear his account."

"Well, Mr. Holmes, it is difficult for me to refuse you anything, for you have been of use to the force once or twice in the past, and we owe you a good turn at Scotland Yard," said Lestrade.

"At the same time I must confess that I am very much surprised, therefore, when yesterday about 3 o'clock in the afternoon he walked into my office in the city. But I was still more astonished when he told me the object of his visit. He had in his hand several sheets of a notebook covered with scribbled writing—here they are—and he laid them on my table."

"Here is my will," said he. "I want you, Mr. McFarlane, to cast it into proper legal shape. I will sit here while you do so."

"I set myself to copy it, and you can imagine my astonishment when I found that, with some reservations, he had left all his property to me. He was a strange little ferretlike man, with white eyelashes, and when I looked up

at him I found his keen gray eyes fixed upon me with an amused expression. I could hardly believe my eyes as I read the terms of the will, but he explained that he was a bachelor with hardly any living relation, that he had known my parents in his youth and that he had always heard of me as a very deserving young man and was assured that his money would be in worthy hands. Of course I could only stammer out my thanks.

"The will was duly finished, signed and witnessed by my clerk. This is it on the blue paper, and these slips, as I have explained, are the rough draft. Mr. Jonas Oldacre then informed me that there were a number of documents—building leases, title deeds, mortgages, scrip, and so forth—which it was necessary that I should see and understand. He said that his mind would not be easy until the whole thing was settled, and he begged me to come out to his house at Norwood that night, bringing the will with me, and to arrange matters. 'Remember, my boy, not one word to your parents about the affair until everything is settled. We will keep it as a little surprise for them.' He was very insistent upon this point and made me promise it faithfully."

"You can imagine, Mr. Holmes, that I was not in a humor to refuse him anything that he might ask. He was my benefactor, and all my desire was to carry out his wishes in every particular. I saw a telegram home, therefore, to say that I had important business on hand and that it was impossible for me to say how late I might be. Mr. Oldacre had told me that he would like me to have supper with him at 9, as he might not be home before that hour. I had some difficulty in finding his house, however, and it was nearly half past before I reached it. I found him—"

"One moment," said Holmes. "Who opened the door?"

"A middle-aged woman, who was, I suppose, his housekeeper."

"And it was she, I presume, who mentioned your name?"

"Exactly," said McFarlane. "Pray proceed."

McFarlane wiped his damp brow and then continued his narrative:

"I was shown by this woman into a sitting room, where a frugal supper was laid out. Afterward Mr. Jonas Oldacre led me into his bedroom, in which there stood a heavy safe. This he opened and took out a mass of documents, which we went over together. It was between 11 and 12 when we finished. He remarked that we must not disturb the housekeeper. He showed me out through his own French window, which had been open all this time."

"Was the blind down?" asked Holmes.

"It will not be sure, but I believe that it was only half down. Yes, I remember how he pulled it up in order to swing open the window. I could not find my stick, and he said, 'Never mind, my boy, I shall see a good deal of you now, I hope, and I will keep your stick until you come back to claim it.' I left him there, the safe open and the papers made up in packets upon the table. It was late that I could not get back to Blackheath, so I spent the night at the Aerley Arms, and I knew nothing more until I read of this horrible affair in the morning."

"Not until I have been to Blackheath," said Holmes.

"You mean to Norwood," said Lestrade.

"Oh, yes; no doubt that is what I must have meant," said Holmes, with his enigmatical smile. Lestrade had learned by more experience than he would care to acknowledge that that razorlike brain could cut through that which was impervious to him. I saw his look curiously at my companion.

"I think I should like to have a word with you presently, Mr. Sherlock Holmes," said he. "Mr. McFarlane, two of my constables are at the door, and there is a four wheeler waiting." The wretched young man arose and with a last beseeching glance at us walked from the room. The officers conducted him to the cab, but Lestrade remained.

Holmes had picked up the paper

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Holmes had picked up the paper

which formed the rough draft of the will and was looking at them with the keenest interest upon his face.

"There are some points about that document, Lestrade, are there not?" said he, pushing them over.

The official looked at them with a puzzled expression.

"I can read the first few lines and these in the middle of the second page and one or two at the end. Those are as clear as print," said he, "but the writing in between is very bad, and there are three places where I cannot read it at all."

"What do you make of that?" said Holmes.

"Well, what do you make of it?"

"That it was written in a train. The good writing represents stations, the bad writing movement, and the very bad writing passing over points. A scientific expert would pronounce at once that this was drawn up on a suburban line, since nowhere save in the immediate vicinity of a great city could there be so quick a succession of points. Granting that his whole journey was occupied in drawing up the will, then the train was an express, only stopping once between Norwood and London bridge."

Lestrade began to laugh.

"You are too many for me when you begin to get on your theories, Mr. Holmes," said he. "How does this bear on the case?"

"Well, it corroborates the young man's story to the extent that the will was drawn up by Jonas Oldacre in his journey yesterday. It is curious, is it not, that a man should draw up so important a document in so haphazard a fashion. It suggests that he did not think it was going to be of much practical importance. If a man drew up a will which he did not intend ever to be effective he might do it so."

"Well, he drew up his own death warrant at the same time," said Lestrade.

"Oh, you think so?"

"Don't you?"

To be continued.

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