



The Return of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure XXIX -- The Adventure of the Norwood Builder

First published in:

Collier's, October 31, 1903; *Strand Magazine*, November 1903

Time frame of story:

Midsummer 1894

HOLMES & WATSON living arrangements:

Watson no longer married, probably a widower. (He mentioned his sad bereavement in *The Adventure of the Empty House* a few months previously, probably his wife's death.) He sold his practice and moved back to 221B with Holmes, at Holmes' request.

Opening scene:

During breakfast conversation, Holmes laments that since Moriarty's death London had become a singularly uninteresting city for the criminal expert, although he concedes the community is certainly the gainer, and no one the loser, save the poor out-of-work specialist in crime. A visitor then rushed unceremoniously in to see Holmes.



Client:

The visitor was a new client, John Hector McFarlane, a young solicitor (lawyer). He was flaxen-haired and handsome, in a washed-out negative fashion, with frightened blue eyes, a clean-shaven face, and a weak, sensitive mouth. His age was about twenty-seven; his dress and bearing were that of a gentleman.

Crime or concern:

Client was accused of killing the well-known Norwood Builder Mr. James Oldacre. Oldacre had been an acquaintance of McFarlane's family, had no heirs, and hired McFarlane to prepare his will. To McFarlane's surprise, he was not just hired to prepare the will, but he was the main beneficiary. Then he went to his client's house to go over some papers that night and stayed in a hotel, returning to town the next morning. Oldacre had disappeared overnight, and his stacks in the timber-yard had burned. Some charred organic remains were found in the ashes, plus buttons from Oldacre's clothing. Lestrade came to 221B and arrested the client for murder after Holmes heard his story.

Villain:

Oldacre, the presumed victim. He was a little wizened ferret-like man, with white eyelashes, and had keen gray eyes. Turned out he was not really dead but hiding in a secret room he had built in his house. He had been putting a large amount of money into the account of Mr. Cornelius, who was actually Oldacre himself using an alias.

Motive:

Financial speculation had gone against Oldacre, so he tried to swindle his creditors by faking his death, and then planned to move and start life again as Mr. Cornelius.

Logic used to solve:

Oldacre overdid it with a false bloody thumbprint of McFarlane made from a wax seal, placed on the wall overnight. Holmes had already inspected the area and knew the print appeared after the client was already in gaol. He then suspected Oldacre and paced off some dimensions in the house and determined the location of the hiding place. Holmes then smoked him out.

Policemen:

Inspector Lestrade was there, and also his head constable, plus two others, all with strong voices.

Holmes' fees:

No mention.

Transport:

Oldacre wrote his will on the train from Norwood to London, as evidenced by varied writing neatness. Neat in stations, messy while he was in motion, and illegible while passing over points (switches).

Food:

No mention of what Holmes & Watson ate for breakfast.

Drink, Vices:

No mention

Other cases mentioned:

The case of the papers of ex-President Murillo, and also the shocking affair of the Dutch steamship Friesland, which so nearly cost Holmes & Watson their lives.

The terrible murderer, Bert Stevens in '87, a mild-mannered, Sunday-school man.

Notable Quotables:

"It amused me to make him reveal himself. Besides, I owed you a little mystification, Lestrade, for your chaff in the morning." – Holmes

"You will find that your reputation has been enormously enhanced. Just make a few alterations in that report which you were writing, and they will understand how hard it is to throw dust in the eyes of Inspector Lestrade." – Holmes, allowing Lestrade to take credit for solving the case.

"I pay a good deal of attention to matters of detail, as you may have observed." – Holmes

Other interestings:

A young doctor, named Verner, had purchased Watson's small Kensington practice, and gave with astonishingly little demur the highest price that Watson ventured to ask. The incident explained itself some years later, when it was learned that Verner was a distant relation of Holmes, and that it was Holmes who had really found the money.

When all was said and done:

Holmes to Oldacre: “What was it you put into the wood-pile besides your old trousers? A dead dog, or rabbits, or what? You won’t tell? Dear me, how very unkind of you! Well, well, I daresay that a couple of rabbits would account both for the blood and for the charred ashes. If ever you write an account, Watson, you can make rabbits serve your turn.”

McMurdo’s Camp