



The Return of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure XXIX – The Adventure of the Norwood Builder

John Hector McFarlane was an unhappy young man, indeed. He awoke one morning to find from the newspapers that he was a wanted man — wanted for the presumed murder of his benefactor, the man who had just made McFarlane the sole beneficiary of his will. The evidence against him was damning: his cane, with traces of blood on it, had been found at the scene of the crime. Documents in the murdered man’s room pointed to him as the killer. His presence at the scene was definitely established by the housekeeper who admitted him to Deep Dene House.

McFarlane was a frightened man, but he wasn’t stupid. He headed directly for 221B Baker Street and laid his plight at the feet of Sherlock Holmes, protesting his innocence. Inspector Lestrade arrested McFarlane in the rooms at 221B, and the accused man was led away with one last pleading glance at Holmes.

Although Holmes was convinced of McFarlane’s innocence, he could find nothing to countervail the evidence piled against him. Indeed, he could only find things that would strengthen Lestrade’s case. Finally, crowing with victory, Lestrade informed Holmes that the last and most compelling evidence of McFarlane’s guilt had been discovered: his thumbprint, in blood, left on the wall of Deep Dene House. But it was this “final straw” which enabled Holmes to clear his client and apprehend the real culprit.



It is my considered opinion that Jonas Oldacre, the Norwood Builder, is underrated as a Canonical villain. His plan to wreak revenge upon his former “sweetheart” and escape his creditors in doing so is as byzantine a scheme as you will find in the Sacred Writings. And so, my fellow Hounds, I ask you: If Colonel

Sebastian Moran was the second most dangerous man in London, John Clay the fourth smartest man in London (with a claim to be third for daring), Charles Augustus Milverton the worst man in London, what similar title would you bestow upon Jonas Oldacre?

Holmes refers to “the case of the papers of ex-President Murillo” in an apparent reference to WIST, except that there were no papers involved in WIST. According to Canonical chronologists, WIST took place in 1890 and NORW in 1895. Why did Watson publish NORW in 1903 and wait until 1908 to bring forth WIST? Or is it possible that the reference to “ex-President Murillo” is not an allusion to WIST at all, but to some as yet unchronicled tale?

An examination of the grounds at Deep Dene House revealed that a “bulky object” had been dragged across the ground from the French windows, through an intervening privet hedge, to the wood-pile. Would even the combined strength of Mrs. Lexington and Oldacre suffice to drag a bulky object through a privet hedge? Would (or could) a cold-blooded murderer drag a body through a privet hedge, leaving telltale signs in the process? And what was the “bulky object” that Oldacre, possibly in tandem with Mrs. Lexington, dragged to the wood-pile?

Oldacre wasn't telling, but Holmes speculated that a dead dog or rabbit had been burned in the wood-pile, along with a pair of Oldacre's trousers. Witnesses at the scene of the fire smelled burning flesh, and “organic remains” were found among the ashes. Where would Oldacre get a dead dog or a rabbit for that matter? And since bones rarely burn completely (remember the upper condyle of a human femur in SHOS), wouldn't the organic remains have revealed that they were not the residuum of a human body?

Holmes says, with respect to the means of replicating McFarlane's thumbprint, “It was the simplest thing in the world for [Oldacre] to take a wax impression from the seal...” Indeed? How easy was it? The seal is waxen; how does one go about taking an impression of it with warm wax without destroying the seal in the process?

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