



Arthur Conan Doyle Encyclopedia

The Return of Sherlock Holmes Adventure XXIX -- The Adventure of the Norwood Builder

SUMMARY (Diogenes Club)

Holmes has been back for several months. Watson is again living at Baker St. Nothing is said about the whereabouts of Mrs. Watson (deceased?).

McFarlane is a solicitor. He is a bachelor and lives with his parents. Oldacre appears in his office one day and asks him to draw up a will for him. Oldacre has made MacFarlane his sole heir although the two have never met. MacFarlane recalls that his parents once knew him but have not seen him for many years.

Oldacre asks McFarlane to come to his house that night to go over some deeds etc. He explains that he has remained a bachelor and has no other heirs. McFarlane goes to Deep Dene as requested.

The next morning McFarlane reads in the paper that Oldacre was murdered during the night and his body burned in a pile of lumber in the back yard. He is the prime suspect. MacFarlane rushes to Holmes for help.

When a bloody thumbprint of MacFarlane's appears on a wall that Holmes knows for sure was blank the day before, he solves the case: the murder was staged to free Oldacre from his creditors. MacFarlane was made the patsy because Oldacre never forgave his mother for jilting him.

Oldacre is hiding in a small secret room which he has built within Deep Dene. Holmes literally "smokes him out" by faking a house fire.



SUMMARY (ACD Encyclopedia)

One morning, as Holmes is complaining to Watson (who had moved back to Baker Street few month ago) about the lack of interesting criminal case since the death of Moriarty, a panic-stricken young solicitor

called John McFarlane burst in the room, certain that he is about to be arrested for the murder of Jonas Oldacre, a builder in Lower Norwood.

Oldacre is a wealthy 52-year-old bachelor that McFarlane hadn't met until the day before, when he came to the law office to announce that he intended to make him heir to a considerable bequest, having heard high praise of the young man. Oldacre invites McFarlane home on the same night to seal the deal.

The next day, Oldacre is missing and burnt remains were found after a fire in a wood pile behind his house. Signs of a struggle, scattered papers and McFarlane's walking stick were found in his home.

Lestrade, who arrived in 221B Baker street in the meantime, arrests the young man; Holmes, who noticed that Oldacre's will seems to have been written carelessly on a train, states he's heading to Blackheath, where McFarlane's parents are living. He learns that Oldacre and McFarlane's mother were engaged years earlier but she broke it off. Continuing to Norwood, he examined the builder's house but found nothing that could exonerate the lawyer. He did, however, find a "curious little point" in Oldacre's papers: lately, several cheques for substantial amounts had been made out to a Mr. Cornelius. The next day, Holmes and Watson head back to Norwood, asked here by Lestrade who shows them new evidence against McFarlane: his bloody thumbprint on the wall. Holmes, who had examined the wall the day before and was certain the print hadn't been there, then, understands that Oldacre is still in the house and starts a fire to bring him out of hiding.

Oldacre claims it had all been a practical joke, but Holmes explains to Lestrade he acted out of revenge toward the woman who rejected him and had intended to start a new life under the name of Cornelius.

SUMMARY (Wikipedia)

Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson are visited by "the unhappy John Hector McFarlane," a young lawyer from Blackheath who has been accused of murdering one of his clients, builder Jonas Oldacre. McFarlane explains to Holmes that Oldacre had come to his office only a day earlier and asked him to draw up his will in legal language. To his surprise, McFarlane saw that Oldacre was making him the sole beneficiary and even heir to a considerable bequest, and McFarlane cannot imagine why he would do so. That business took McFarlane to Oldacre's house in Lower Norwood, where some documents had to be examined for legal purposes and where the murder allegedly took place. McFarlane left quite late and stayed at a local inn. He claims to have read about the murder in the newspaper the next morning on the train. The paper said quite clearly that the police were looking for him.

The evidence against the young McFarlane is quite damning. His stick has been found in Oldacre's room, and a fire was extinguished just outside in which a pile of dry timber burnt to ashes, complete with the smell of burnt flesh. It seems more than likely that McFarlane did the crime, especially as it is known that he

was there around that time. Inspector Lestrade gloats in the apparent knowledge that he, unlike Holmes, is on the right track. Holmes begins his own investigation into the matter by going to Blackheath. This puzzles Lestrade, who had expected him to go first to Norwood. McFarlane's mother, Holmes finds out, was once engaged to Oldacre years earlier but later wanted nothing to do with the man once she found out how cruel he was: he had let a cat loose in a bird sanctuary.

Upon examining the handwritten notes given to McFarlane by Oldacre to be rendered into legally acceptable language, Holmes reckons they were written in a very haphazard fashion as if the writer failed to care about what he was writing. The alternation between legible handwriting and incomprehensible squiggles suggests to Holmes that the "will" was written hurriedly on a train, with the legible writing representing stops at stations. Also, Oldacre's financial dealings are found to have been a bit odd. Several cheques for substantial amounts, for unknown reasons, have recently been made out to a Mr. Cornelius. The discovery of Oldacre's trouser buttons in the fire ashes does nothing to exonerate McFarlane. Holmes fears the worst; "All my instincts are in one direction, and all the facts are in another." Still, Holmes has powers of observation that suggest Oldacre's housekeeper is deliberately withholding information.

Lestrade's gloating reaches a peak when a bloody thumbprint is found at Oldacre's house that matches McFarlane's thumb. However, Holmes becomes quite sure that something very devious is afoot, as he had examined that part of the house only a day earlier, and the thumbprint was quite surely not there then. Because McFarlane has been in gaol since his arrest at 221B Baker Street, Holmes deduces that someone is attempting a deception. Holmes sets up a small fire in one room of the house with a little straw and tells three of Lestrade's constables to shout "Fire!" Lestrade and Watson are quite astonished at what happens next: Oldacre emerges alive from a hidden chamber at the end of a hallway, where Holmes has deduced it must be by measuring the corridors, and runs to escape the fire. Oldacre is immediately seized.

It is revealed that McFarlane being accused of his murder had been part of a revenge campaign against the woman who rejected Oldacre years previously, the young mother of McFarlane. Oldacre tries to pass off his actions as a practical joke but is taken into custody, along with the housekeeper as an accomplice. Holmes lightly chaffs his rival for neglecting Blackheath, where he acquired the key information. As for Mr. Cornelius, the recipient of so much of Oldacre's munificence, Holmes deduces that it had likely been an alias used by Oldacre, who has been leading a double life with the eventual goal of shedding his Oldacre identity so that he would be able to start a new life. The bank account of "Mr. Cornelius" will be seized by Oldacre's creditors. Oldacre swears revenge against Holmes, who serenely dismisses the threats. Holmes remarks to Lestrade that Oldacre's plot was nearly perfect.

Still, he went one step too far by planting the thumbprint (from a wax seal that McFarlane had pressed), thinking it would create even more damning evidence, after Holmes had already examined the room where it was found. "He wished to improve what was already perfect", says Holmes, "and so he ruined everything."