

The Adventure of the Norwood Builder.

(Continued.)

"Indeed, Holmes: what is it?"

"Only this, that I know that that mark was not there when I examined the hall yesterday. And now, Watson, let us have a little stroll round in the sunshine."

"With a confused brain, but with a heart into which some warmth of hope was returning, I accompanied my friend in a walk round the garden. Holmes took each face of the house in turn and examined it with great interest. He then led the way inside and went over the whole building from basement to attic. Most of the rooms were unfurnished, but none the less Holmes inspected them all minutely. Finally, on the top corridor, which ran beside three unoccupied bedrooms, he again was seized with a spasm of merriment.

"There are really some very unique features about this case, Watson," said he. "I think it is time now that we look our friend Lestrade into our confidence. He has had his little smile at our expense, and perhaps we may do as much by him if my reading of this problem proves to be correct. Yes, yes, I think I see how we should approach it."

"The Scotland Yard detective was still writing in the parlor when Holmes interrupted him.

"I understood that you were writing a report of this case," said he.

"So I am."

"Don't you think it may be a little premature? I can't help thinking that your evidence is not complete."

Lestrade knew my friend too well to disregard his words. He laid down his pen and looked curiously at him.

"What do you mean, Mr. Holmes?"

"Only that there is an important witness whom you have not seen."

"Can you produce him?"

"I think I can."

"Then do so."

"I will do my best. How many constables have you?"

"There are three within call."

"Excellent!" said Holmes. "May I ask if they are all large, able-bodied men with powerful voices?"

"I have no doubt they are, though I fail to see what their voices have to do with it."

"Perhaps I can help you to see that and one or two other things as well," said Holmes. "Kindly summon your men, and I will try."

Five minutes later three policemen had assembled in the hall.

"In the out-house you will find a considerable quantity of straw," said Holmes. "I will ask you to carry in two bundles of it. I think it will be of the greatest assistance in producing the witness whom I require. Thank you very much. I believe you have some matches in your pocket, Watson. Now, Mr. Lestrade, I will ask you all to accompany me to the top landing."

As I have said, there was a broad corridor there, which ran outside three empty bedrooms. At one end of the corridor we were all marshaled by Sherlock Holmes, the constables grinning and Lestrade staring at my friend with amazement, expectation and derision clashing each other across his features. Holmes stood before us with the air of a conjurer who is performing a trick.

"Would you kindly send one of your constables for two buckets of water? Put the straw on the floor here, free from the wall on either side. Now I think that we are not ready."

Lestrade's face had begun to grow red and angry.

"I don't know whether you are playing a game with us, sir," Sherlock Holmes said to him. "If you know anything you can surely say it without all this tomfoolery."

"I assure you, my good Lestrade, that I have an excellent reason for everything that I do. You may possibly remember that you chaffed me a little some hours ago when the sun shined on your side of the hedge, so you must not grudge me a little pomp and ceremony now. Might I ask you, Watson, to open that window and then to put a match to the edge of the straw?"

I did so, and, driven by the draft, a coil of gray smoke swirled down the corridor, while the dry straw crackled and flamed.

"Now we must see if we can find this witness for you, Lestrade. Might I ask you all to join in the cry of 'Fire!' Now, then—one, two, three!"

"Fire!" we all yelled.

"Thank you. I will trouble you once again."

"Fire!"

"Just once more, gentlemen, and all together."

"Fire!" The shout must have rung over Norwood.

It had hardly died away when an amazing thing happened. A door suddenly flew open out of what appeared to be a solid wall at the end of the corridor and a little wizened man darted out of it like a rabbit out of its burrow.

"Capital!" said Holmes calmly. "Watson, a bucket of water over the straw. That will do! Lestrade, allow me to present you with your principal missing witness, Mr. Jonas Oldacre."

The detective stared at the newcom-

er with blank amazement. The latter was blinking in the bright light of the corridor and peering at us and at the smoldering fire. It was an odious face—crafty, vicious, malignant, with shifty, light gray eyes and white lashes.

"What's this, then?" said Lestrade at last. "What have you been doing all this time, eh?"

Oldacre gave an uneasy laugh, shrinking back from the furious red face of the angry detective.

"I have done no harm."

"No harm? You have done your best to get an innocent man hanged. If it wasn't for this gentleman here I am not sure that you would not have succeeded."

The wretched creature began to whimper.

"I am sure, sir, it was only my practical joke."

"Oh, a joke, was it? You won't find the laugh on your side, I promise you. Take him down and keep him in the sitting room until I come, Mr. Holmes," he continued when they had gone. "I could not speak before the constables, but I don't mind saying in the presence of Dr. Watson that this is the brightest thing that you have done yet, though it is a mystery to me how you did it. You have saved an innocent man's life, and you have prevented a very grave scandal, which would have ruined my reputation in the force."

Holmes smiled and clapped Lestrade upon the shoulder.

"Instead of being ruined, my good sir, 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."

"And you don't want your name to appear?"

"Not at all. The work is its own reward. Perhaps I shall get the credit also at some distant day, when I permit my zealous historian to lay out his footstep once more—eh, Watson? Well, now, let us see where this rat has been lurking."

A lath and plaster partition had been run across the passage six feet from the end, with a door cunningly concealed in it. It was lit within by slits under the eaves. A few articles of furniture and a supply of food and water were within, together with a number of books and papers.

"There's the advantage of being a builder," said Holmes as we came out.

"He was able to fix up his own little hiding place without any confederate, save, of course, that precious house-keeper of his, whom I should lose no time in adding to your bag, Lestrade."

"I'll take your advice. But how do you know of this place, Mr. Holmes?"

"I made up my mind that the fellow was in hiding in the house. When I paced one corridor and found it six feet shorter than the corresponding one below it was pretty clear where he was. I thought he had not the nerve to lie quiet before an alarm of fire. We could, of course, have gone in and taken him, but it amused me to make him reveal himself. Besides, I owed you a little mystification, Lestrade, for your chaff in the morning."

"Well, sir, you certainly got equal with me on that. But how in the world did you know that he was in the house at all?"

"The thumb mark, Lestrade. You said it was final, and so it was in a very different sense. I knew it had not been there the day before. I paid a good deal of attention to matters of detail, as you may have observed, and I had examined the hall and was sure that the wall was clear. Therefore it had been put on during the night."

"But how?"

"Very simply. When those packets were sealed up Jonas Oldacre got McFarlane to secure one of the seals by putting his thumb upon the soft wax. It would be done so quickly and so naturally that I dare say the young man himself has no recollection of it. Very likely it just so happened, and Oldacre had himself no notion of the use he would put it to. Brooding over the case in that den of his, it suddenly struck him what absolutely damning evidence he could make against McFarlane by using that thumb mark. It was the simplest thing in the world for him to take a wax impression from the seal, to moisten it in as much blood as he could get from a pin prick and to put the mark upon the wall during the night either with his own hand or with that of his housekeeper. If you examine among those documents which he took with him into his retreat I will lay you a wager that you find the seal with the thumb mark upon it."

"Wonderful!" said Lestrade. "Wonderful! It's all as clear as crystal as you put it. But what is the object of this deep deception, Mr. Holmes?"

"It was amusing to me to see how the detective's overhearing manner had changed suddenly to that of a child asking questions of its teacher."

"Well, I don't think that is very hard to explain. A very deep, malicious, vindictive person is the gentleman who is now waiting us downstairs. You know that he was once refused by McFarlane's mother? You don't! I told you that you should go to Blackheath first and Norwood afterward. Well, this injury, as he would consider it, has rankled in his wicked, scheming

(Continued on last page.)

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