

Three short stories from

The Return of Sherlock Holmes



Sir Arthur
Conan Doyle



The Norwood builder

Chapter 1

"There seem to be no interesting cases any more, Watson," Sherlock Holmes said to me. "London isn't interesting now."

"I don't think the people of London would say that," I answered.

"Well, I suppose I mustn't think only of myself," he said. He smiled as he pushed his chair back from the breakfast table. "It is better for everybody if detectives like me have nothing to do."

I smiled too. Holmes had really had quite a lot of work during the past few months. But I must say that the world seemed very quiet that morning. We hadn't got much interesting work to do.

Sherlock Holmes sat back in his chair. He picked up his newspaper. He was just going to start reading when there was a loud ring on the doorbell. I heard Mrs Hudson open the door; she was the lady who cooked and cleaned for us. Somebody ran into the house very quickly. He opened our door and stood in front of us. He looked very frightened and I thought he had been running, because he was breathing hard.

He suddenly seemed to remember that Holmes and I must be surprised to see him come in like that.

"I'm sorry, Mr Holmes," he cried. "I must talk to you now. I can't wait. I feel very frightened. I am John Hector McFarlane; you must know my name already."

"Sit down quietly, Mr McFarlane," said Holmes. "No, I don't know your name. I can see that you are not married and that you are a lawyer."

The man seemed surprised that Holmes knew these

things, but it didn't surprise me. Holmes was a good detective, and he had noticed the man's dirty clothes and the lawyers' papers in his hand.

"Yes, that is true, Mr Holmes," he replied. "And it is also true that I am the unhappiest man in London today. Please, you must help me! The police are coming to arrest me, I think. A detective followed me from the station to your house. I don't mind going to prison if you will help me."

"The police are coming?" said Holmes. He looked very happy. I knew that he hoped there was going to be an interesting case for him. Then he remembered poor Mr McFarlane and said, "I'm sorry, Mr McFarlane; I wasn't thinking about you. This sounds very interesting. Why do the police want you?"

"They think I killed a man called Jonas Oldacre, who lived at Lower Norwood."

Our visitor picked up the newspaper and I could see that his hands were shaking. Holmes had not started reading his newspaper.

"If you look at your newspaper, you will see why I have come to see you, Mr Holmes," he said. "I think everyone in London must know my name by now. Look here in the middle pages." He read to us.

"FIRE AT LOWER NORWOOD. RICH MAN DISAPPEARS. IS HE DEAD? HAS HE BEEN KILLED?"

"It says here that the police think that I may have killed Mr Oldacre for his money. It will make my poor old mother very unhappy. What can I do?"

I looked at Mr McFarlane carefully. He was a handsome man with fair hair. I thought he was about twenty-seven years old and his good clothes showed me that he had plenty of money.

Holmes said, "There isn't much time, Watson. Please

read what it says in the newspaper." This is what I read.

"Late last night, or early this morning, something happened at Lower Norwood and the police are afraid that an important man may be dead. Everybody in Lower Norwood knows the name of Mr Jonas Oldacre the builder. He is sixty-two years old, and is not married. He lives at Deep Dene house in Sydenham Road. He has few friends and doesn't like meeting people. He made a lot of money as a builder when he was a young man but he doesn't work any more. He still keeps a lot of wood at the back of his house. Last night, at about twelve o'clock, a lot of that wood caught fire—or someone set fire to it. It was impossible to stop it burning. At first, it seemed like an ordinary fire, but then someone noticed that the owner of the house was not there. They found that he had not slept in his bed. In one room there were some important papers on the table and it looked as if someone had been fighting there. A stick was found on the floor and also a little blood. The police know that Mr Oldacre had a visitor last night and they think the stick belongs to him. He is a lawyer and his name is Hector McFarlane. The police think that he had a good reason for killing Mr Oldacre. We expect that something exciting will happen soon."

At the bottom of the page were some more facts which had been added later.

"Some people are already saying that Mr McFarlane has been arrested. If he has not, the police are certainly looking for him. At Norwood, it seems that something heavy was pulled through the grass from the house to the place where the wood was. They say it is possible that a dead body was burned with the wood. They seem to think that Mr Oldacre was killed in his house then taken outside and burned. Mr Lestrade, of Scotland Yard, is working on the case and we are sure that he will soon

say what happened."

The first thing Sherlock Holmes asked Mr McFarlane was why the police had not already arrested him.

"I live with my mother and father at Torrington Lodge, Blackheath," said Mr McFarlane. "But last night I was not at home. I stayed at a hotel near Mr Oldacre's house in Norwood because I had visited him very late in the evening. The police will try to catch me at home or at my office this morning, or a detective may even come here for me."

Chapter 2

Suddenly our doorbell rang again and we heard Mrs Hudson letting some men in. The door opened and our friend Lestrade, the detective from Scotland Yard, came in. Lestrade looked at McFarlane and said, "You are John Hector McFarlane and you must come with me because you killed Jonas Oldacre last night."

McFarlane stood up; his face was white.

"Sit down," said Holmes. "And Mr Lestrade, please sit down too."

"But I must take Mr McFarlane away," said Lestrade.

"Half an hour doesn't matter to you," replied Holmes. "And Mr McFarlane was just going to tell us what happened last night."

"Well, Mr Holmes," said Lestrade. "Because you are my friend and you have helped me in the past, I will wait for half an hour, no more than that."

"Thank you," said Holmes. Then he asked Mr McFarlane to tell us exactly what had happened.

Mr McFarlane began. "Yesterday morning I knew nothing about Mr Oldacre except his name. He used to be a friend of my mother and father but he is not any more. I was very surprised when he came to my office

yesterday. He had these pieces of paper with him and he said that his will was written on them. I am a lawyer and he said that he wanted me to make a proper copy of it for him. He wanted to wait while I wrote it. I began the work and I soon saw that he wanted me to have all his money when he was dead. I couldn't understand why, so I asked him. He told me that as he had no children of his own he wanted me to have the money because he used to know my father.

"Of course I thanked him for his great kindness, but I was still very surprised. I made the copy as quickly as possible. When I had finished he asked me to go to his house that night to see some more important papers. The last thing he said was, 'Please don't tell your mother and father. I want this to be a surprise for them.'

"Well Mr Holmes," McFarlane continued, "he had been so kind to me that I wanted to do exactly what he said. I told my father that I had important business and might be very late home from work.

"Mr Oldacre asked me to have dinner with him at nine o'clock but it took me a long time to find his house and I didn't arrive until half past nine. When I saw Mr Oldacre—"

"Stop!" said Sherlock Holmes. "Who opened the door for you?"

"An old woman. I think she worked for Mr Oldacre," replied Mr McFarlane.

"And was it she who told Mr Oldacre that you had arrived?" asked Holmes.

"Yes, it was," he replied. "Then she took me into a room where there was a simple meal waiting for me on the table. I ate some of the food, then Mr Oldacre took me to his bedroom. There was a strong cupboard in the room and he took a lot of papers from it. We worked on them for a long time and didn't finish until about

half past eleven. Mr Oldacre told me I had better leave quietly by the back door because the old woman was asleep.

"When I was leaving I couldn't find my stick, but Mr Oldacre said, 'That doesn't matter, my boy. You can collect it another day. I hope you are going to visit me very often from now on.'"

"When I left him, the cupboard was open and the papers were on the table. It was too late to go back to Blackheath, so I stayed at the Anerly Arms in Norwood. I didn't know about all this until I read the paper this morning."

Mr McFarlane stopped speaking and Lestrade said, "Have you any more questions, Mr Holmes?"

"No. I want to go to Blackheath first," said Holmes.

"Don't you mean Norwood?" asked Lestrade.

"Perhaps..." replied Holmes and he smiled at Lestrade. The detective looked as if he didn't understand. Holmes often understood things more quickly than Lestrade did and the detective knew this.

Lestrade said, "There are two policemen waiting for you outside Mr McFarlane. You must go with them now."

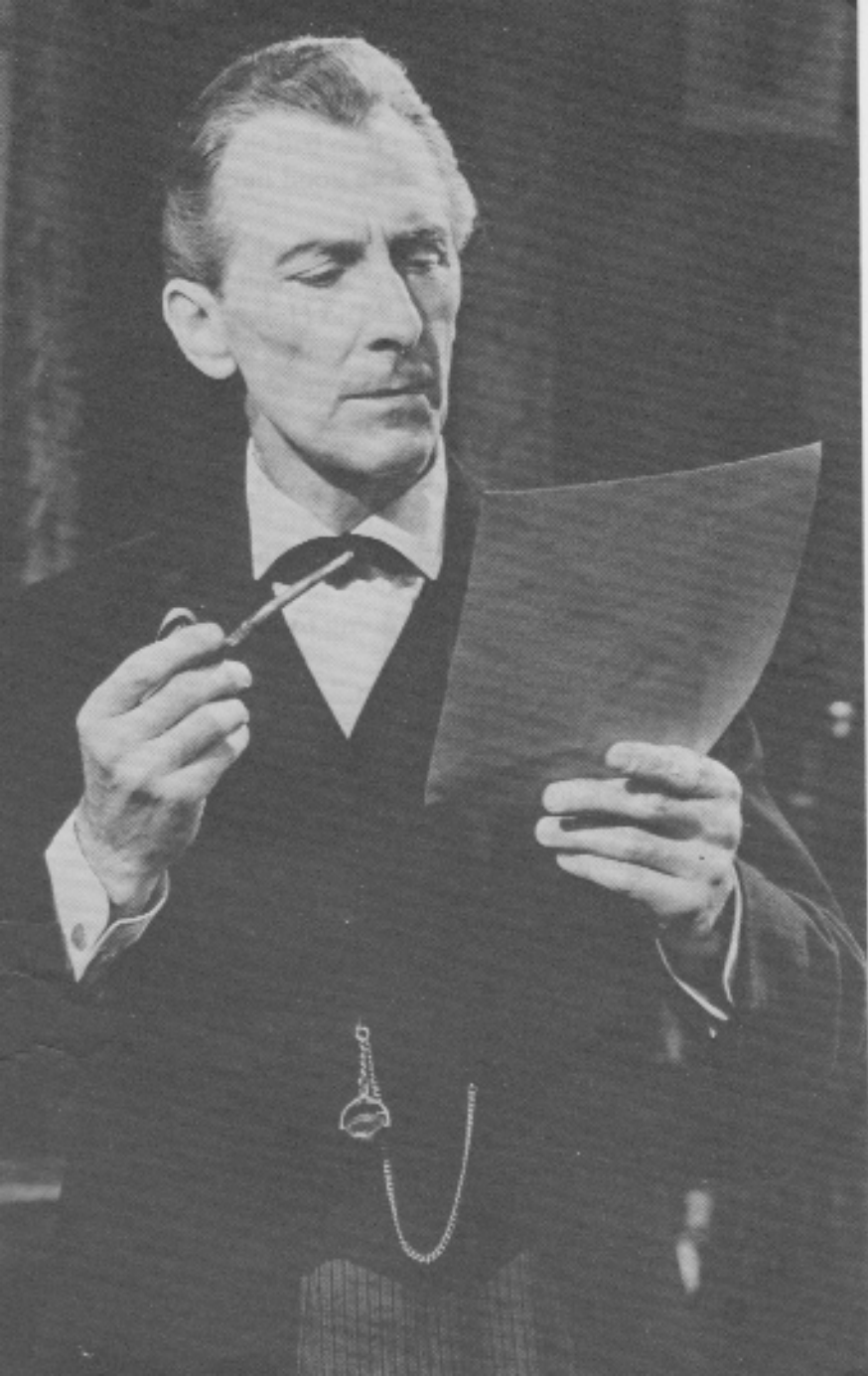
The policemen took Mr McFarlane away. His face was still white and he looked at Holmes very sadly, but he said nothing.

Chapter 3

Lestrade stayed in the room with us after McFarlane had gone. Holmes picked up the papers that the lawyer had left. He looked at them, then gave them to Lestrade.

"These are very interesting, aren't they, Lestrade?" he said.

Lestrade looked at the papers for a minute then said,



"I can understand the first few lines perfectly, the writing is good. After that the writing is so bad that I can't read it. Later on, there are a few more good lines, then the writing is bad again."

"Why do you think it is like that?" asked Holmes.

"Why do *you* think it is like that?" replied Lestrade.

"The answer is very simple," said Holmes. "Mr Oldacre wrote this on the train when he was coming to London to see Mr McFarlane. The good parts were written at stations, the bad parts were written when the train was moving."

Lestrade laughed and said, "Very good, Mr Holmes. But how does that help us with the case?"

"Well," said Holmes. "I think it is rather surprising that a man should write his will on the train; it seems as if he didn't think it was really going to be very important."

"It was very important for him," said Lestrade. "It is because of his will that he is dead now."

"Do you think that is true?" asked Holmes.

"Don't you?" replied Lestrade.

"That is possible, but the case is not very clear to me yet," was Holmes's answer.

"Not clear?" said Lestrade. "It is very clear to me. When McFarlane knew that he would get Mr Oldacre's money, he went to Norwood and killed him. Then he burned the dead body with the wood. He hoped that nobody would know what had happened to Mr Oldacre because they would find nothing. It seems very simple to me."

"Too simple," said Holmes. "McFarlane is not a fool and it would be very foolish to kill a man on exactly the same day that he had made his will. It would also be silly to kill Mr Oldacre when his servant knew who was in the house. Remember the old woman let Mr McFarlane

in. Another thing, why should he burn the body so carefully, but be careless and leave his stick behind in the room?"

"You know very well, Mr Holmes," said Lestrade, "that when a man has just killed someone he doesn't always think very clearly. It is easy to forget a thing like a stick. Perhaps he was afraid to go back to the room. Can you give me any other reason why Mr Oldacre was killed?"

"I can think of many possible reasons," said Holmes. "For example, suppose a man was passing the house and saw the two men in the room with the papers. He might think that they had money there. When Mr McFarlane left, this man could come in through the window and kill Mr Oldacre."

"Why didn't he take anything?" asked Lestrade.

"Because he found only papers; there was no money in the room," said Holmes.

Lestrade did not seem very sure of his ideas any more but he said, "Well, you may look for your man if you want to, Mr Holmes, but I think it was McFarlane who killed Mr Oldacre. He had a perfect reason and was also the only person in the world who did not need to take anything because everything was going to be his soon."

"I didn't say that you were wrong," replied Sherlock Holmes. "I only wanted to show you that there were other possible ways in which Mr Oldacre was killed. Goodbye, Mr Lestrade. I expect I shall come to see you at Norwood later today."

Lestrade left us and Holmes started to put on his coat.

"I'm going to Blackheath," he said.

"Why not Norwood?" I asked.

"Two strange things have happened, my friend, and the police are only thinking about one of them. The first thing was the strange will. I want to know why

Oldacre wanted to give his money to Mr McFarlane."

"Do you want me to come with you?" I asked.

"No, it isn't necessary; you can't help me. There is no danger at Blackheath," replied Holmes. He left. I knew that he wanted to help Mr McFarlane very much.

Chapter 4

It was quite late when my friend returned from Blackheath and I could see that he was not happy. He said, "I am afraid the case is difficult, Watson. This time I think that Lestrade may be right. I still don't think McFarlane killed Oldacre, but the facts help Lestrade and they don't help me. I'm afraid he will win."

"Did you go to Blackheath?" I asked.

"Yes, I did," said Holmes, "and I quickly found out that Oldacre was a very nasty man indeed. I spoke to Mr McFarlane's mother. She was very angry and afraid. She told me that many years ago Oldacre wanted to marry her. She would not become his wife because she discovered that he had been very cruel to some animals he had. This made him angry. On the day of Mrs McFarlane's marriage to her present husband he sent her a copy of her photograph which he had cut into small pieces. He also sent a letter saying that he hated her and her new husband. If the police discover this they will think that young Mr McFarlane has another reason for killing Oldacre.

"I discovered nothing else at Blackheath, so I went to Norwood."

Holmes showed me a plan he had made of Oldacre's house and garden. The garden was large and the place where the wood was kept was a long way from the nearest road. Lestrade had not been there when Holmes visited the house but another policeman had shown him



everything.

"They have found some pieces of Oldacre's clothes where the fire was," continued Holmes, "and a doctor has told them that it is possible that a man or an animal was burned there. I looked at everything very carefully, but I found nothing new. There is very little blood in the bedroom and there are only the marks of two men's feet on the floor.

"I found that Oldacre had not got as much money at the bank as people said he had. I don't think that killing him would make McFarlane a rich man.

"At last I spoke to the old woman, Oldacre's servant. I think she knows something but she wouldn't tell me very much. She told me she had let McFarlane into the house at about 9.30 and that she thought he left his stick in the hall. She soon went to bed and did not wake up until she heard people coming to the house because they had seen the fire. She says she thinks that the pieces of cloth come from the clothes that Mr Oldacre was wearing that night. That is all she told me but I am sure she is hiding something. I feel it."

Next, Holmes told me that Oldacre had been paying money to a "Mr Cornelius". This was the reason that he had so little money at the bank himself. Nobody could tell Holmes who Cornelius was. Holmes's face became very serious as he finished speaking. "I am afraid that Lestrade will be able to hang Mr McFarlane and I don't know how to stop him."

I went to bed soon after this but I don't think I Holmes slept all that night.

Chapter 5

When I got up next morning Sherlock Holmes was reading the morning newspapers. There was a letter

from Norwood on the table. It said
Come to Norwood soon. I have discovered
a new fact. I am sure now that McFarlane
killed Oldacre.

Lestrade.

"This sounds very serious," I said.

"Lestrade is clearly very pleased because he thinks he
has beaten me for the first time," replied Holmes. "I
must go to Norwood. Please, Watson, will you come
with me? I need a friend today."

When we arrived at Oldacre's house in Norwood,
Lestrade was waiting for us. He looked very pleased
with himself.

"Hello, Mr Holmes," he cried. "Have you found your
man yet?"

"I haven't found anything yet," replied Holmes
quietly.

"Well, I have," said Lestrade.

"You certainly seem very pleased with yourself,"
Holmes answered.

Lestrade laughed loudly and said to me, "Sherlock
Holmes really doesn't like being beaten, does he, Dr
Watson?" I did not reply and he continued, "Please
come this way, gentlemen."

He led us into the hall. "This is where McFarlane
must have come to get his hat after he killed Oldacre,"
he said, "Now look here."

He pointed to a mark on the wall. It was the mark of
a finger and it was the colour of blood.

"That is the mark of John Hector McFarlane's finger,"
said Lestrade. He showed us a piece of paper. On it there
was another mark exactly the same as the one on the
wall. Mr McFarlane had made it in prison that morning.

"That is the end of the case," said Lestrade proudly.

"Yes, it is," I agreed.

"Yes, it *is*," said Holmes in a strange voice. I looked at him; I was surprised to see that he looked very happy. Lestrade continued to talk in a very proud way. He thought Holmes was beaten, but I could see that Holmes was really laughing at him.

"Very good!" said Holmes. "This must be a lesson to us all, mustn't it, Lestrade?"

"Yes, it must," the detective replied.

"Who discovered this mark?" asked Holmes.

"Mr Oldacre's servant, the old woman. She found it this morning."

"You are sure that the mark was there yesterday?" said Holmes.

Lestrade thought that my friend was mad and I must say that I could not understand what he meant by his question.

"Mr Holmes," said Lestrade, "how do you think that McFarlane could get out of prison to come here and make the mark? Even if it were possible it would be a stupid thing to do."

Then Holmes said, "Well, it is the mark of his finger, we can be sure of that."

"Yes, we certainly can," said Lestrade. "And now, gentlemen, I must go. I am a busy man and I must write my report on this case." He left us and went quickly into the sitting room.

When he had closed the door I asked Holmes why he had looked so pleased when Lestrade showed us the mark.

"Because I *know* that it was not there yesterday," was his simple reply. "I looked at the wall carefully. The police didn't look as carefully as I did; that is why they are not the best detectives. Now, Watson, let's go for a nice walk in the garden."

I followed Holmes. I couldn't understand how the

mark had got there and I could see that Holmes wasn't going to tell me yet. He looked at every part of the outside of the house, then we went back inside and he carefully looked in every room. We looked in every cupboard and walked down every passage. We were in the last passage at the top of the house when Holmes suddenly started laughing again.

"This is an interesting case, Watson," he said.

"Lestrade thinks he has beaten me; he had fun when we were talking about the mark in the hall, but I think I can have some fun now. What shall I do...? I know!"

We went down to the room where Lestrade was working and Holmes asked, "Are you writing your report, Mr Lestrade?"

"Of course I am," the detective replied. He sounded rather angry with us for coming in when he was busy.

"Isn't it too early to write a report?" Holmes asked. Lestrade put down his pen and looked at him. He knew Holmes well and he could see that he had something important to tell him.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Well, there is one important person in this case that you haven't spoken to," said Holmes.

"Really? Who? Can you show me this person?" said Lestrade in a very surprised voice.

"Yes, I think I can," said Holmes, "but I shall need some help. How many policemen are there here?"

"Three," said Lestrade.

"Are they strong men, with good loud voices?" asked Holmes.

"Yes, they are, but I don't see how their voices can help us."

"You will soon see," said Holmes. "Now, please ask one policeman to bring some old newspapers. There are a lot in the hall. The other two must bring buckets of

water."

The policemen brought the things and all six of us went up to the top of the house. The policemen were smiling and Lestrade still thought that Holmes was mad. I did not know what my friend was going to do.

Chapter 6

Sherlock Holmes walked to the end of the passage like an actor and carefully put the newspapers on the floor. Then he said to me, "Watson, please open the window, then set fire to these papers."

I did what he asked and the papers soon started to burn. Next Holmes said, "Now I want you all to shout, 'Fire!' with me as loudly as you can. One, two, three—"

"Fire!" we all shouted.

"Again!" cried Holmes.

"Fire!"

"Again!"

"FIRE!" we shouted very loudly indeed.

Suddenly the wall at the end of the passage opened just like a door. An ugly little man ran out, like a rabbit coming out of its hole.

"Very good," said Holmes. "Watson, put some water on the fire!" Then he said to Lestrade, "This is Mr Jonas Oldacre."

Lestrade couldn't believe it at first. He said, "Where have you been for the last two days?"

Oldacre laughed, but he was clearly afraid of Lestrade. "I haven't hurt anyone," he said.

"You haven't hurt anyone!" repeated Lestrade angrily. "Because of you Mr Hector McFarlane is in prison. We thought he had killed you. He was in danger of being hanged."

"I only did it for a joke," said Oldacre.

"You aren't going to have any more jokes now!" said Lestrade. He told the policemen to take Oldacre away.

When they had gone, Lestrade said, "I must thank you, Mr Holmes. I was rude to you earlier today and I am sorry. I really thought that the case was finished. It would have been very bad indeed if Mr McFarlane had been hanged for something he didn't do."

"Don't worry," said Holmes kindly. "Nobody will know what happened. You can change your report and it isn't necessary to say that I did anything to help."

"But don't you want people to know how clever you have been?" asked Lestrade.

"No," said Holmes. "I am happy with my work and that is enough for me. Now, let's see where that rat has been living."

The end of the passage had been made into a small room. Inside it there was a little furniture. On the table there was some food and water and also some papers. When the door was closed it was impossible to see that the room was there.

"Oldacre was a builder, so he was easily able to make this place for himself," said Holmes. "He didn't need anyone to help him with his plan except his servant."

"How did you know that he was here?" asked Lestrade.

"I thought he must be hiding somewhere in the house," Holmes replied. "I found that this passage was shorter than the one underneath it, then it was clear to me where he was."

"That was clever," said Lestrade, "but what made you think that he was in the house?"

"The finger mark," said Holmes. "I knew that it was not there yesterday because I looked; so it must have been put there last night."

"But McFarlane was in prison. How was it done?"

"I think you will find that when Oldacre and McFarlane were working on the papers they used a lot of red wax to close the envelopes," said Holmes. "I think Oldacre asked McFarlane to put his finger on the wax to make sure that the envelopes closed properly. That would make a clear mark on the wax. Later Oldacre used some more wax to put the mark on the wall. He probably used a little blood from his own finger."

"Wonderful!" said Lestrade. "Wonderful! But why did he do all these things, Mr Holmes?"

I wanted to laugh when I saw this detective, who had been so proud in the morning, asking questions like a child talking to his teacher.

"That doesn't seem difficult," said Sherlock Holmes. "Oldacre hated McFarlane's mother because she once refused to marry him. . . . You didn't know that, Lestrade, because you never visited Blackheath. Oldacre is a very nasty and dangerous man. He waited for many years for a chance to make Mrs McFarlane unhappy. He wanted to make the police hang her son and at the same time he wanted to get some money."

"Get some money, how?" asked Lestrade.

"The papers we looked at show that Oldacre had troubles with his money," said Holmes. "I think he wanted to disappear and escape from the people he owed money to. He paid a lot of money to this 'Mr Cornelius' but I don't think that there is a man with that name. I think Oldacre was going to change his own name to Cornelius after he disappeared."

"The will gave Mr McFarlane a reason for killing him and the fire meant that there was no need for a dead body. After a time people would forget Jonas Oldacre. Mr Cornelius, of course, would live in a different part of England—or in another country. It was the clever plan

of a nasty man. But now, Mr Lestrade, let's go and ask him one or two more questions."

We went down to the room where the policemen were keeping Jonas Oldacre. When he saw us he said once again, "I only did it for a joke. I didn't want to hurt dear Mr McFarlane."

"I don't think anyone will believe that," said Lestrade. "I think you will have to go to prison, Mr Oldacre."

"And I think the police will take all Mr Cornelius's money too," Holmes added.

Oldacre looked at Holmes and said in a very angry voice, "I will kill you, Sherlock Holmes!"

Holmes smiled and said, "You are not the first man who has said that to me, but I think that you are going to be too busy in prison to do anything for the next few years. Before you go, I have a question for you. What did you burn with the wood to make the police doctor think that a human body might have been burnt? Was it a dead dog, or perhaps some rabbits?"

Oldacre sat still in angry silence. Holmes laughed and said, "He doesn't want to tell us, Watson. Well, it isn't important. If you ever write the story of the Norwood builder you can say that it was rabbits."