

The Adventure of the Norwood Builder

A Simplified Retelling for English Language Learners (CEFR B1)

From *The Return of Sherlock Holmes* by Arthur Conan Doyle

Background: Who Are These People?

Sherlock Holmes is a famous private detective who lives in London. He is brilliant at solving crimes and noticing small details that others miss.

Dr Watson is Holmes's close friend and assistant. He is a doctor. He tells the stories of their cases together.

Inspector Lestrade is a detective from Scotland Yard — the official London police headquarters. He is a capable officer, but not as clever as Holmes.

A Note on Life in 1900s England

In this story, you will read about some things that were typical in England around 1900:

- **A solicitor** is a type of lawyer. Solicitors helped people with legal documents, wills, and business contracts.
 - **A will** is a legal document that says who will receive a person's money and property after they die.
 - **A will's "heir"** is the person who will inherit the money or property.
 - **"Scotland Yard"** was (and still is) the headquarters of the London Metropolitan Police. The name comes from the street where it was originally located.
 - **Telegram** — before telephones were common, people sent short written messages called telegrams, delivered quickly by messenger services.
 - **A hansom cab** was a horse-drawn taxi — a two-wheeled carriage with a driver sitting at the back. This was the standard way to travel around London before cars.
 - **Blackheath, Norwood, Sydenham** are suburbs — residential areas on the outskirts of London, connected to the city centre by railway.
 - **"The Daily Telegraph"** was (and still is) one of London's major newspapers.
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Part 1: A Visitor in Panic

One morning, Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson were finishing breakfast at their flat in Baker Street. Holmes was feeling bored.

"London has become a very uninteresting city for a detective," he said. "Since Professor Moriarty died, there are no great crimes anymore."

(Professor Moriarty was Holmes's most dangerous enemy — a criminal mastermind whom Holmes had defeated some months earlier.)

"I'm sure most ordinary Londoners are very happy about that," said Watson.

Holmes smiled. "Yes, of course. But it does leave me without much work."

Just then, they heard a loud bang on the front door, followed by the sound of feet running up the stairs. A young man burst into the room. He was pale, his hair was untidy, and he looked terrified.

"I'm sorry, Mr Holmes," he cried. "You mustn't blame me. I am going mad with worry. My name is John Hector McFarlane."

He said his name as if Holmes would immediately recognise it, but Holmes showed no sign of this.

"Sit down, Mr McFarlane," said Holmes calmly. "Take a cigarette. Now — I can see that you are unmarried, that you work as a solicitor, and that you have some trouble with your breathing. But beyond that, I know nothing about you. Please tell us, slowly and clearly, what has happened."

(Holmes could tell McFarlane was a solicitor because he was carrying a bundle of legal papers sticking out of his coat pocket. He noticed other small details too, from the way the man was dressed and carried himself.)

The young man stared in amazement at Holmes's observations. Then he began to speak.

"Mr Holmes, I am going to be arrested for murder. For the murder of a man named Jonas Oldacre, of Lower Norwood. Look — it is already in the newspaper."

He picked up *The Daily Telegraph* from the table and pointed to a large headline on the inside page. Holmes asked Watson to read it aloud.

Watson read: "*Mysterious Affair at Lower Norwood. Disappearance of a Well-known Builder. Suspicion of Murder and Arson. A Clue to the Criminal.*"

The article explained that Jonas Oldacre was a 52-year-old builder who lived alone in a large house called Deep Dene House in Lower Norwood, a suburb south of London. At midnight, a fire had been discovered in a pile of wood in his garden. By the time the fire brigade arrived, the wood had burned completely. It was then noticed that Oldacre himself had disappeared. His bedroom showed signs of a struggle. There was blood on the floor, and a walking stick — with blood on the handle — had been found. The stick belonged to a young solicitor named John Hector McFarlane, who had visited Oldacre that same evening. The police believed Oldacre had been murdered, and that his body had been burned in the wood pile. A warrant had been issued for McFarlane's arrest.

"That is the situation, Mr Holmes," said McFarlane. "I stayed in a hotel in Norwood last night after my meeting with Oldacre. I knew nothing about any of this until I read the paper on the train this morning. I have come straight to you. They will arrest me very soon, I am sure. Please help me. This will destroy my mother."

Part 2: McFarlane's Story

"We must use the time we have," said Holmes. "Tell us everything."

McFarlane explained:

"Until yesterday, I had never met Jonas Oldacre in my life. I knew his name because he had been friends with my parents when they were young — but they had lost contact with him many years ago. You can imagine my surprise when he walked into my office in the city yesterday afternoon at about three o'clock.

"He told me he wanted me to write his will. He said he had almost no living relatives, that he had known my parents as a young man, and that he had heard good things about me. He showed me the draft of the will, written in a notebook. When I read it, I could hardly believe my eyes — he was leaving almost all his property to me.

"I finished writing the proper legal document, and he signed it. Then he told me he had many important papers at his home — property documents, contracts, and other legal materials — and that he wanted me to come to his house that evening to go through them together. He asked me not to tell my parents about the will until everything was settled. He wanted it to be a surprise. I agreed.

"I sent a telegram home to say I would be late. I arrived at his house at about half past nine. His housekeeper let me in. Oldacre gave me supper, and then we went to his bedroom, where he kept a large safe. We went through the papers together. It was between eleven and midnight when we finished. He showed me out through the French window — a large glass door that opened directly into the garden — which had been open the whole time. I realised I had left my walking stick in his room. He told me not to worry, and that he would keep it until I came back. I could not travel home to Blackheath at that late hour, so I stayed the night at a nearby hotel called the Anerley Arms. The next morning, I read in the paper that Oldacre had disappeared, and that my stick had been found covered in blood."

McFarlane stopped speaking, his face white with fear.

Holmes asked a few careful questions — particularly about the French window and whether the curtain had been up or down. McFarlane thought the curtain had been only halfway down.

At that moment, there was a loud ring of the doorbell, and heavy footsteps on the stairs. Inspector Lestrade came through the door. Behind him, Watson could see two uniformed police officers.

"Mr John Hector McFarlane?" said Lestrade.

"Yes," said McFarlane, standing up slowly, his face completely grey.

"I am arresting you for the murder of Jonas Oldacre of Lower Norwood."

McFarlane turned to Holmes with a look of despair and sank back into his chair.

"One moment, Lestrade," said Holmes. "This young man was about to finish his account, and it might be important. Half an hour will make no difference to you."

Lestrade agreed, but warned McFarlane that anything he said could be used against him in court. McFarlane said he was happy for them to hear everything — he wanted only the truth to be known.

When McFarlane had finished speaking, Lestrade looked satisfied.

"It all fits perfectly," said Lestrade. "The young man visits, learns he will inherit everything when the old man dies, waits until the housekeeper is in bed, kills Oldacre, burns the body, and walks to a nearby hotel. Open and shut."

"You make it sound very simple," said Holmes. "But tell me — if you were planning a murder, would you choose the night immediately after the will was signed? Would you visit when the housekeeper had already seen your face at the door? And would you leave your own walking stick at the scene?"

Lestrade shrugged. "Criminals make mistakes when they panic."

"Perhaps," said Holmes. "Or perhaps things are not as obvious as they look."

Lestrade glanced at his watch, then took McFarlane downstairs to a waiting cab. He came back briefly to speak with Holmes.

Holmes was holding the handwritten draft of the will and examining it closely.

"Look at the handwriting," said Holmes, showing it to Lestrade. "Some lines are clear and neat. Others are shaky and almost unreadable. What does that suggest to you?"

Lestrade studied the pages. "I can read the beginning, a little in the middle, and the end. The rest is very difficult."

"It was written on a train," said Holmes. "The neat parts were written when the train was stopped at a station. The shaky parts were written while the train was moving. This will was written by Oldacre during his journey to London yesterday — which means he thought of leaving his money to McFarlane only at the last moment, on the way there. That is rather strange, don't you think? A man who writes his will so carelessly perhaps does not expect it to ever be used."

Lestrade looked thoughtful for a moment, then shook his head. "Interesting, Mr Holmes, but I think our case is solid. You'll find us at Norwood when you're ready." And he left.

Part 3: Holmes Investigates

Holmes spent the day investigating. That evening, he returned to Baker Street looking tired and worried.

"It's going badly, Watson," he said, dropping into his chair and picking up his violin. He played for a while, then put it down and explained what he had found.

"First, I went to McFarlane's family home in Blackheath to speak with his mother. His father was out looking for his son. His mother was very upset, but she was absolutely certain her son was innocent.

"She told me something interesting about Oldacre. When she was young, he had wanted to marry her. She had refused him — partly because she had discovered that he had once let a cat loose inside a room full of birds just to watch it cause harm. She described him as cruel and cunning. On the morning of her wedding to someone else, Oldacre had sent her a photograph of herself with the face cut out and damaged. He had never forgiven her.

"When I told her that Oldacre had left all his money to her son, she was not impressed. 'Neither my son nor I want anything from that man,' she said.

"Then I went to Norwood and visited the house. I found the police busy searching the ashes from the burned wood pile. They had found some metal trouser buttons in the ashes — and they were identified as coming from clothes made by Oldacre's tailor. They also found marks on the grass showing that something heavy had been dragged from the house to the wood pile. I looked carefully at the garden and the bedroom. The blood stains were very small — only smears, really. And I noticed one possibly important thing: some of the papers described in the documents I had read were missing from the safe. The bank records also showed that in the past year, Oldacre had been making large payments to someone called 'Mr Cornelius.' I have no idea who that is.

"I also spoke with the housekeeper — a small, dark, quiet woman named Mrs Lexington. She admitted that McFarlane had arrived at half past nine and had left his hat and, she believed, his stick in the hallway. She said she went to bed at half past ten and heard nothing after that. She was polite, but something in her eyes told me she was hiding something.

"So, Watson — I found almost nothing to help McFarlane. The evidence against him is very strong. But I am certain something is wrong. My instinct tells me this is not what it appears to be."

The next morning, Holmes had not slept. He was sitting in his chair surrounded by cigarette ends and early newspapers. A telegram had arrived. Holmes handed it to Watson.

It read: *Important fresh evidence to hand. McFarlane's guilt definitely established. Advise you to abandon case. — Lestrade.*

"This sounds very serious," said Watson.

"Or perhaps it is exactly what I have been hoping for," said Holmes, with a strange smile.

"Come, Watson. Let us go to Norwood."

Part 4: The Thumbprint

At the house, they found Lestrade looking very pleased with himself.

"We've got him, Mr Holmes," said Lestrade. "Come and see."

He led them down a corridor to the dark entrance hall. He struck a match dramatically and held it up to the white-painted wall.

There, clearly visible, was a bloody thumbprint.

"Compare it with this," said Lestrade, producing a wax impression of McFarlane's right thumb, which the police had taken that morning. He held the two side by side.

Even without a magnifying glass, it was obvious — the two marks were identical.

"That is final," said Lestrade.

"Yes," said Watson quietly. "That is final."

"It is final," agreed Holmes.

Watson glanced at Holmes and noticed something unexpected. Holmes's eyes were shining with excitement. He was trying very hard not to laugh.

"Dear me," said Holmes softly. "How very interesting. And how deceptive appearances can be."

Lestrade looked pleased. "I thought you'd see it our way eventually, Mr Holmes."

"Tell me," said Holmes, "who discovered this thumbprint?"

"The housekeeper, Mrs Lexington. She pointed it out to the officer on duty last night."

"And the officers who were here yesterday — they did not see it?"

"Well, they had no particular reason to examine the hall closely."

"Quite so," said Holmes. "Quite so."

Lestrade went to write his report. Holmes turned to Watson, and this time he allowed himself a small smile.

"Watson, there is one very important problem with this evidence."

"What is it?"

"I examined this hall carefully yesterday. The wall was completely clean. That thumbprint was not there when I looked. It has appeared overnight."

Watson stared at him. "But what does that mean?"

"It means," said Holmes, "that someone put it there during the night. And since McFarlane has been in a police cell since yesterday morning, there is only one explanation."

Part 5: The Hidden Room

Holmes asked Lestrade to come back to the hallway.

"Before you finish your report," said Holmes, "I believe there is an important witness you have not yet spoken to."

"A witness?" said Lestrade. "Who?"

"I think I can produce him. I will need your three officers, a bundle of straw from the garden shed, and a bucket of water."

Lestrade looked at Holmes as if he thought he was joking, but he had worked with Holmes long enough to know better. He gave the orders, and a few minutes later they were all standing at

the far end of the upstairs corridor — Holmes, Watson, Lestrade, and three police officers. Two bundles of dry straw lay on the floor. A bucket of water stood nearby.

"Open that window, Watson," said Holmes. "And then light the edge of the straw."

Watson did as he was asked. Smoke began to drift along the corridor. The dry straw crackled and caught fire.

"Now," said Holmes, "I would be grateful if everyone could shout 'Fire!' together. Nice and loud, please. One, two, three—"

"FIRE!" they all shouted.

"Once more."

"FIRE!"

"Once more, gentlemen — as loudly as you can."

"FIRE!" The shout echoed through the whole house.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then, at the far end of the corridor — where there appeared to be nothing but a plain wall — a hidden door suddenly burst open. A small, thin, frightened-looking man came rushing out, coughing and looking around wildly.

"Excellent!" said Holmes. "Watson — the water on the straw. Lestrade — may I introduce you to your missing witness: Mr Jonas Oldacre."

Part 6: The Truth

Oldacre blinked in the bright light of the corridor. He was a small, unpleasant-looking man with pale eyes and white eyelashes. He looked at them with fear and cunning.

"What's this, then?" said Lestrade, stepping forward. "What have you been doing in there?"

"It was just a joke," said Oldacre, shrinking back. "A practical joke. I simply hid myself to see what would happen."

"A joke?" said Lestrade, his face turning red with anger. "You have done your best to get an innocent man hanged. If it wasn't for Mr Holmes, you might have succeeded."

Oldacre began to make excuses and to whine, but Lestrade ordered the officers to take him downstairs and keep him in the sitting room.

When he had gone, Lestrade turned to Holmes.

"I have to admit," he said quietly, "this is the most brilliant thing I have ever seen you do. You have saved an innocent man's life. But how did you know he was in the house?"

"The thumbprint told me," said Holmes. "You said it was 'final' — and you were right, but not in the way you thought. I knew that wall had been clean the day before. So the print had been placed there deliberately, during the night. McFarlane was in a police cell. The only person who could have put it there was Oldacre himself, or his housekeeper — which meant Oldacre was still in the house.

"As for finding the hiding place — when I walked along this corridor, I noticed it was about six feet shorter than the corridor on the floor below. That could only mean one thing: part of it had been closed off. Oldacre is a builder by trade. It would have been easy for him to build a hidden room."

"And the thumbprint itself?" asked Lestrade. "How did he get McFarlane's print?"

"Very simply. During their meeting, when they were sealing the documents, Oldacre asked McFarlane to press his thumb onto the soft wax of a seal. It would have seemed completely natural, just part of the process of closing the envelopes. McFarlane probably doesn't even remember doing it. Later, hiding in his secret room, Oldacre realised he could use that wax

impression to create false evidence. He moistened it with a small amount of blood — from a pin prick, most likely — and pressed it onto the wall during the night."

Lestrade shook his head slowly. "Remarkable. But why did he do all this in the first place?"

Holmes explained:

"Jonas Oldacre was a bitter and vengeful man. Many years ago, McFarlane's mother had refused to marry him — and he never forgave her for it. He had been waiting for the chance to hurt her ever since.

"In the past year or two, he had also got into serious financial trouble. He had been secretly sending large amounts of money to a person called 'Mr Cornelius' — who was, I believe, simply himself, using a false name. He had opened a bank account in that name in another town, planning to disappear, take the money, and start a new life somewhere else.

"Then he thought of something even better: if he staged his own disappearance and made it look like McFarlane had murdered him, he could escape his debts and also destroy McFarlane's family at the same time — the perfect revenge on the woman who had once rejected him.

"He made a will leaving everything to McFarlane — to give him a reason to commit the murder. He invited McFarlane to come at night, when no one would see him leave. He kept the walking stick. He burned some animal bones and buttons in the wood pile to suggest a body had been burned. He hid in his secret room and waited for the police to arrest McFarlane.

"It was an almost perfect plan. But he could not resist making it just a little more certain by adding the thumbprint last night. And that extra step was his mistake — because I had already seen that the wall was clean."

Conclusion

Oldacre was arrested and charged with conspiracy and attempted murder. His financial fraud was also discovered. The housekeeper, Mrs Lexington, who had helped him and said nothing to the police, was also arrested.

McFarlane was immediately released.

Holmes smiled and patted Lestrade on the shoulder. "You will find that your reputation benefits greatly from this case, my good Lestrade."

"And you don't want any credit for yourself?" asked Lestrade.

"The work is its own reward," said Holmes. "Besides, Watson will write it up one day, won't you, Watson?"

Watson smiled. "Of course. Though I think Holmes would like me to mention one last detail."

Holmes laughed. "Yes — I asked Oldacre what he had put in the wood pile, besides his old trousers, to produce the blood and ashes. He refused to tell me. But I believe it was a couple of rabbits."

Comprehension Notes for Teachers

Key themes for classroom discussion:

- The danger of circumstantial evidence (evidence that seems to point to someone, but does not prove guilt)

- The difference between Holmes's method (observation + logic) and Lestrade's approach (fitting evidence to the most obvious conclusion)
- Revenge as a motive — how Oldacre's plan was driven entirely by a grudge held for many years

Vocabulary from the story worth studying at B1: *evidence, arrest, warrant, suspect, motive, will (n.), inherit, forge (to make a fake), alibi, investigation, witness, confession, fraud*

Original story by Arthur Conan Doyle, first published 1903.